

The limits of left moralism

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Rowan Fortune examines the tendency of some on the left to converge with reactionary right wing politics through “pipelines” rooted in moralistic rather than ethical approaches, arguing this results from a lack of praxis and undeveloped political consciousness.

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The rise, mainstreaming and consolidation of far-right and reactionary politics worldwide has been meteoric since 2016. This was theoretically examined in depth by the archaeologist, historian and Anti*Capitalist Resistance founder-member, the late Neil Faulkner, in *Creeping Fascism*, coauthored with Samir Dathi, Phil Hearse, and Seema Syeda.

One crucial question is, what are the pathways — or pipelines to use online language — to adopting such disturbing politics? We should understand this issue not through individualistic, liberal anti-radicalism, which treats fascism as a crisis of personal morality, but to discover the social forces at play and how they are gathering strength. Fascism is not something outside of society, but a process within social relations that alters the totality of all social relations.

Pipelines

Much has been written on the right-wing libertarian-to-fascist pipeline, but the left has also seen some of its own people travel that path, leading some to skirt dangerously close in their political commitments to the same ideas that the far right advocates. There are many such pipelines, and they poison and undermine our project for human emancipation.

In the downfall of the comedian then prophet Russell Brand, for example, even before being credibly accused of sexual abuse, we see the new age-to-conspiracy theorist pipeline. In sections of the feminist movement that reorientated from fighting for women’s liberation to agitating hate against transgender people, such as WPUK, we see the feminist to gender critical pipeline, which can lead to professed socialists demonstrating alongside the far right mobilising to ‘defend family values’. In the likes of George Galloway and Stop the War and their international politics, we can see how some anti-war and left pacifist perspectives lead to neo-campism and implicit or explicit support for authoritarian regimes like those of Bashir Al Assad or Vladimir Putin.

Not all of these politics are fascist, but they share a reactionary trajectory, and they all bolster the fascist arguments in operation within broader society. As Faulkner stressed, fascism is not a static

category to be identified only at the point of its fullest formation but a historical process shaped and reshaped by material and sensuous conditions.

So why do some on the left (broadly, those favouring the liberation of the exploited and marginalised) sometimes converge with the right (broadly, who deny the severity or existence of exploitation and marginalisation and advocate for retaining the status quo)? On the surface, this appears perversely contradictory. But as marxists know, contradictions are fundamental to history, not unusual to it.

Horseshoes

Liberals sometimes propose horseshoe theory as an answer, a visual metaphor conveying a formalistic (pseudo-)explanation. As with a horseshoe, the politics of the most extreme left ("extreme" opposition to the status quo) and right (extreme defence of the status quo) are said to bend together, allegedly by dint of their mere distance from the so-called liberal centre.

The problems with this theory are numerous. As a largely empty abstraction, it is simply devoid of much in the way of content or context to honestly explain why any particular person or group would shift political allegiance. It would also suggest that liberal centrists (as well as those on the centre-left and far-right) would never converge with reactionary politics, which is absurd.

However, the left dismisses horseshoe theory often without mapping an alternative, acting as if there is no problem of convergence to be explained at all. This is just as disingenuous. However, genuine attempts have been made to grapple with the reactionary left by those on the left, and it is to these we should turn with an urgent seriousness.

The quite badly aged essay by Mark Fisher, "Exit the Vampire Castle", is one instance of the left trying to contend with the problem of convergence. However, Mark Fisher's analysis, exemplified in his defence of the now disgraced Brand, is flawed. He rightly identifies the culprit, moralism, but then himself collapses into moralism in his analysis, simplistically blaming privileged young people who lack an investment in real world struggle. Moralism is always a pseudo explanation, even of moralism itself.

What is moralism?

At root, moralism substitutes analysis for condemnation. It does this by dividing the world into categories of "good" and "bad". These condemnations may or may not be valid, but that is irrelevant. It does not seek to understand; it operates in the very failure of understanding.

Moralism occupies gaps created by absent or underdeveloped praxis/struggle, which results in turn in underdeveloped or absent theory. Jonas Ceika's *How to Philosophize with a Hammer and Sickle* identifies five characteristics of moralism;

"1) that it is universal, equally applicable to all, 2) that its obligations are unconditional, 3) that it is ahistorical, valid for all times and places, 4) that we have moral responsibility to follow it, and should feel guilt or remorse if we don't, and 5) that in accordance to it, our actions can be judged as "good" or "evil" in absolute terms."

Crucially, moralism is *not* ethics. Ethics can be rooted in the understanding of particular viewpoints as informed by a negotiated struggle with and in the world, including the social world. (This is true of the ethics that emerge in feminist standpoint epistemology, care ethics, and virtue ethics traditions.)

Ethics is eudaimonic (“striving to do what is meaningful, even if difficult to achieve”); it aims to achieve human flourishing through social practices. But it is also a complicated ideal; for instance, what is right or wrong has changed throughout history. It stresses complex, evolving and nuanced motivations in contrast to a simplistic anvil of shame and guilt. We can argue that Marx endorsed such ethics in his language, with implicit values and emphasis on class struggle as the particular means to achieve the universal (eudaimonic) goal of class abolition. Alternatively, moralism is merely the *assertion* of a universal law, usually intended to ostracise those who fall outside of it.

The Manichean World

The anticolonial Marxist Franz Fanon had an incredibly subtle critique of moralism, one which should help us to form a criticism of moralism that does not, as happened in Fisher’s attempt, itself collapse into moralism. For Fanon, moralism is Manichean, by which he means a simplistic view of good and evil. He defines this initially as the worldview of the colonialist settler:

“The colonial world is a Manichean world[...] The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil.”

THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH

Because the colonists deny the humanity of the indigenous population, Fanon’s natives themselves invert this settler vision, so it becomes the settler who is “absolute evil.” For Fanon, this is unavoidable in anticolonialism’s development. The native, faced with a denial of their humanity and a world that does not permit them, is driven to moralise before they can create a new world beyond moralism. They must create a space for their humanity before they can engage, as human beings, in an emancipatory struggle.

One cannot fight for one’s humanity without first being able to look in the mirror and see a human being. That is why, to understand moralism, we need a non-moralistic critique of moralism, one that challenges Ceika’s criteria of moralism above.

We must appreciate that 1. Moralism is particular and possesses a context; 2. it will emerge alongside struggle - anti-moralism cannot be an unconditional obligation; 3. it emerges historically, in times and places in response to sensuous conditions and prevailing ideas; 4. it is not susceptible to shame or guilt, and 5. it is often partial, and we can indulge moralism in only *some* of our thinking.

Tenderqueer Respectability

The splintering of sexual, women’s, and trans liberation movements showcase how moralism often emerges in the impasses and contradictions of liberatory struggles in a dehumanising, alienated social world. As Fanon noted, this can occur in the origins of struggles, but it can also occur in the tensions, contradictions and defeats experienced in the very process of struggle. Riki Wilchins includes an illustrative example in her book *Burn the Binary!*:

“In the gay community the focus on immutability has led to promoting sexual orientation in a way that is completely removed from gender expression. [...] In the trans community, just the opposite is the case. Gender is promoted at the expense of sexual practice. It’s OK for me to say I’m changing my body because of my ‘gender identity.’”

But it would be considered superficial, even perverse, to say I was doing so because having a more feminine body would turn me on. [...] When gay activists began asserting, "We're just like straights, we just sleep with the same sex," that "just like" was shorthand for "gender." It said, "We look and act just like your parents, your friends, or your boss: don't be uncomfortable with us." And when feminists began explaining, "We're not trying to be men," the phrase "trying to be men" was also shorthand for "gender." It said, "We're just like your wives, mothers, daughters: don't be uncomfortable with us either." [...] It's fair to say that "transgender" was created by the gay and feminist movements. Its emergence became practically inevitable from the day those movements began moving away from gender."

BURN THE BINARY! BY RIKI WILCHINS

What Wilkins shows here is the moralism at play in respectability politics and accommodationist strategies and how such moralism organically develops out of tensions with broader social prejudices. Our response to this, as socialists, cannot be just to castigate and chide those caught in these divisive dynamics; we must instead understand what is happening and intervene in the struggle to develop a more encompassing form of liberatory praxis, a working-class ethics of liberation.

Many young queer people, predominantly a subset of Gen Z queers, today fall into the trap Wilkins described. As a result, some of them are sometimes derided by millennial and Gen X queer people as tenderqueers. The rise of Gen Z so-called tenderqueers is characterised by young queer people whose experience of struggle and community is often highly delimited to an alienated internet. They lack the hubs of queer separatism necessitated by a pre-internet world where the number of queer people expelled by families was even higher than today.

They are also a generation that exists in the shadow of the loss inflicted on the queer community and struggle by the appalling HIV/Aids crisis and the policies of social murder adopted under the Regan and Thatcher governments, as well as reactionary forces elsewhere. The consequence of the loss of the past, the fracturing of geographically concentrated queer communities and the erasure of a continuity of struggle mean that many "tenderqueers" inevitably adopt aspects of the conservative views of their cisgender, heterosexual families, and so come to lack political agency or a sense of broad solidarity.

Such people can adopt a highly de-sexualised aesthetic, often oppose sexual content at pride (as made emblematic in the yearly "no kink at pride" online controversies), and puritanically enforce repressed standards on queer cultural content. In short, they are trying to fit their queerness into social systems that accommodate, but more fundamentally reject, that very queerness.

We should not treat such people as fools but understand the social circumstances that produce their consciousness and address that in the world through organised interventions. We should treat this as a crisis of (in this instance, queer) theory in the context of a crisis of (queer) praxis.

Class for Itself

Like Fanon, Marx was acutely attentive to the emancipatory struggle as a process of developing consciousness. For Marx, when class forces emerge, they also 'moralise' to create a space for their humanity. If such forces change the world to accommodate a more universal humanity, the crucial next step is replacing moralisation with a fuller understanding borne of class struggle and the practical politics of solidarity that must emerge out of it - otherwise known as praxis.

While Marx does not talk of Manicheanism in the same terms as Fanon, his concept of the working *class in itself* is that in this phase, workers seek to reform capitalist society to accommodate their social reproduction but ultimately accept the terms (the ruling ideas, invariably moralistic) of capitalist society in *not* seeking to wholly abolish the society that causes their alienation, exploitation and so on. Only a *class in and for itself*, that understands its historic role and is organised to abolish its exploitation and to end class society *per se*, can become a universal class, i.e. abolish the very idea of class.

Both of these are stages of class organisation and consciousness (class in itself and class in and for itself). Without organisation, there is no class but only atomised workers who lack any cohesiveness or social relationship with one another. Marx is describing, in Hegelian terms, how the working class overcomes its organic moralisation and seeks to overcome present social relations.

The class *in itself* is moralistic because it encounters the limits of its projects in the limits of the social world without surpassing its project. It is only when the working class becomes a class *in and for itself* that it develops a genuine ethics based on the mass struggle to liberate the world from class and all social oppression.

Right-Wing Morality

Right-wing ideology, insofar as it is uniquely of the right (i.e. cannot be absorbed into anything emancipatory or radical), is only an attempt to ease the unbearable tensions thrown up by class society ideologically. The right is not unthinking or simple, but its particular beliefs work against the possibility of emancipation.

In this highly specific sense, the right is moralisation writ large, which is truer the further right one goes. Distilled right-wing thought is a set of condemnatory pseudo-explanations for problems created by the very society the right seeks—often with considerable success—to defend.

This very fact, then, showcases the peril of moralising for the left. Horseshoe theory is nonsense, but the left can and indeed does sometimes converge with reactionary beliefs. The reason for that is not just moralisation but being trapped too long at a moralistic stage of consciousness. Red-brown politics emerges precisely in the stagnant mire of left moralism.

Each pipeline to reaction mentioned at the start of this article is an example of moralism becoming stagnant. The new age movement, pacifism, and those parts of the women's movement that failed to develop a theory of women's oppression rooted in historical developments, all lack a coherent, non-moralistic explanation for the real problems they attempt to address. What is initially an innocent moralism will contort over time, absorbing the reactionary moralism of the broader politics of the right, constantly reinforced by class society.

If, in each instance, we are to overcome left moralism, we must share with Fanon, Wilchins, and Marx an understanding of the reasons for such moralism, and we must engage rather than dismiss the genuine social problems such moralism responds to in such a way that offers a better future, one achieved through shared struggle, solidarity, and the unique forms of historical understanding such a project entails.

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P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 08 Feb 2024:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/the-limits-of-left-moralism/>

- Rowan Fortune is an editor and revolutionary socialist. On their weekly blog, they write on utopian literature and imagination, why grimdark is the dystopian fiction of our time and more. They wrote *Writing Nowhere: A Beginner's Guide to Utopia*; edited the anthology of utopian short fiction *Citizens of Nowhere*; and contributed to the multi-authored *System Crash: An activist guide to making revolution*.