

## **MARX IN THE KEY OF HOPE**

**A workshop funded by the ESRC South West Doctoral Training Centre & hosted by the Department of Social and Policy Sciences, University of Bath**

Friday 29th January 2016 - Room 3.9, Chancellor's Building, University of Bath, Claverton Down, BATH, BA2 7AY

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*This workshop brings together academics, theorists and people involved in social and environmental projects, organisations and activism to read Marx and Marxists' work in the context of current controversies, challenges and alternatives. Through a mutual co-production of knowledge informed by academic research, open discussion, local practitioner expertise and public experience, the work of Marx and Marxists will be read in new ways and shared in new forms with new audiences, in order to be put to new uses.*

### **PROGRAMME**

**09:00 – 9:30 Coffee and Registration**

**09:30 – 09:45 WELCOME – Miss Ana Bullock (SWDTC, University of Bath) – Dr Joe Devine HoD, SPS, University of Bath)**

**09:45 – 10:15: INTRODUCTION-** Ana C. Dinerstein & Frederick Harry Pitts (Bath) *See introductory note attached*

**10:15 – 11:15 THE CITY AS A SPACE OF EXPERIMENTATION**

**Stephen Hunt (Bristol Radical History Group)** *The experimental use of space has occurred in many locations in Bristol and the surrounding area. Stephen Hunt will briefly survey some of the initiatives that have taken place, together with expressions of radicalism in the local alternative media. He will open some speculation as to why a radical culture has arisen locally.*

**Fabian Frenzel (Leicester)** *Value struggles in the creative city: A People's Republic of Stokes Croft?* *Talk based on a paper written with Armin Beverungen exploring the case of Stokes Croft, Bristol, UK, as a neighbourhood in a city which has appropriated the discourse of the creative industries from the bottom up in order to foster its regeneration against capital's art of rent. We show how Stokes Croft's self-branding as a cultural quarter has led to struggles over the creative and cultural commons thus produced, which we conceptualise as value struggles where localised value practices clash with capital's imposition of value. Our case study including two vignettes points both to the productivity of such value struggles in producing new value practices understood as commoning, as well as the limits of reproducing a common life in the face of existing financial and property regimes. Stokes Croft therefore serves as a case in point of the tragedy of the urban commons and points to potential ways of overcoming it.*

**Greig Charnock (Manchester)** *Why does space matter?* *We have before us a conundrum. We are told, by Lefebvre and others, that space matters because urbanization has superseded industrialization; the critique of everyday life has supersede the critique of political economy. In other words, in late capitalism dialectics of (the production of) space matter more than those of time – in both identifying the object of critique and for emancipatory politics. On the other hand, we are told by Harvey and others that, notwithstanding certain specific and conjunctural mediations attached to the production of space/place (the 'sub-prime' catalyst for the current crisis, for instance), the human life process under capitalism remains one that is mediated by the value-form – by congealed socially necessary labour time. We suggest that the two versions of dialectics offered up by Lefebvre, on the one hand, and Harvey, on the other, are incommensurate. Much is at stake in emphasizing this crucial distinction. Both, we suggest, can offer a fruitful means of theorizing contemporary society and its governance, and, indeed, the spatial politics of recent mass mobilizations against 'austerity' (Occupy!, for example). But both imply specific forms of radical politics are necessary ...*

## 11:15 – 12:45 FOOD & LAND

**Naomi Millner (Bristol) Back to the land? Between the romance and defiant histories of the rural commons...***In his later writings, Marx (1881) wrote that the state of crisis 'will end only when the social system is eliminated through the return of modern societies to the "Archaic" type of communal property.' By "Archaic" he suggests collective forms of production and appropriation, which, here, are linked with the historically unique qualities of collective villages in Russia (mir) and elsewhere. Whilst calling for better comprehension of historical transformations in particular locations, Marx is also here evoking precapitalist formations, especially as they survive into the present, as resources for thinking future political transformation. This involves the extraction of the archaic figure for present-day economic conditions: rather than return to the past, the surviving imaginary of the "Commune" arms us with revolutionary potential and constructive logics (Harootunian 2015). On the other hand, it is clear that, when self-consciously yoked to capitalism, as in Germany, Italy, and Japan during the 1930s, archaism can become the 'frightful' foundations for fascist cultural ideology, as Ernst Bloch and Tosaka Jun have observed. The opportunities and pitfalls of archaic thought intersects with a recent explosion of interest in an imaginary of the "commons" within social movements and small-scale experimentations around the world. Grounded in the imaginary of collective systems for governing rural terrain, the commons is being applied into a multitude of contexts of enclosure and dispossession, to attempt to destabilise the hegemony of concepts of private property, ownership, and enclosure. Yet the commons also bears with it the unwitting nationalistic and colonial framings that often accompany romanticist and nostalgic accounts of the land and the past. In my intervention I reflect on these contradictions surrounding archaic time, drawing on the lived experiments of food sovereignty, local food, and landworkers' movements in the UK.*

**Skipchen (Bristol)**

**Werner Bonefeld (York) A critique of hope as critical category**

**12:45 – 13:30 LUNCH served by Bristol Skipchen**

**13: 30 – 15:00 AUTONOMY, SELF-MANAGEMENT & COOPERATION:**

**Bristol Cable Media Co-op** *"The need to redefine local media through cooperatives" This presentation will give an overview of the state of the local media landscape today. Providing evidence of a decline in both availability and quality, a closer look at the transformational processes and conditions in which this happens will form a critique of the structural forms of ownership and organisation behind large media companies. Making the case that information is being turned into an industry skewed in favour of commercially viable content, we will reassert the need for independent and thoroughly researched journalism to maintain crucial and positive local democratic engagement. Addressing these issues, the cooperative model will be introduced as a model that can provide an alternative on the local level. Enabling the development of a sustainable financial model, broad based and representative participation in decision making and content development, and the production of investigative journalism.*

**Sarah Amsler (Social Sciences Centre Lincoln)** *My contribution to this workshop takes the form of questions that have arisen through my experience of working with autonomous (and relatively autonomous), self-organized and co-operative organizations in education and research. Some of these address the reading of Marx's and Marxists' work in contemporary activist projects and movements, as this is focus of the workshop. As my practical experience in self-organization and struggles for autonomy inside and outside heteropatriarchal and capitalist institutions has often not focused on the reading of this work, or has focused on the problems of reading this work, some of my questions also relate to issues around the politics of knowledge more generally. Themes considered include hope and political possibility; feminist and anti-oppressive thinking and practice; the role of theory and other things in practicing autonomy and co-operative organization; recovering from professionalized thinking, radical democracy; and negotiations of hanging on and letting go. Questions: (1) Why do people work for autonomy, self-management and/or co-operation; where it is not a necessity, what gives them hope in it? The revival of such projects and movements around the world is sometimes presented as 'the' alternative to capitalism (or as being a way-station to one). How compelling are the theoretical arguments put forward for this belief – and what (whose) philosophical assumptions, emotional attachments and social positions underpin them? Does understanding this better*

strengthen capacities to practice and protect autonomy for one collective or for all (2) Continuing disinterest in and hostility towards feminism and anti-oppressive practice in some Marxist analyses/politics of autonomy, self-organization and co-operation causes ongoing experiences of domination in 'safe' and 'critical' spaces'. I am thus keen to share and learn where there is good work going on to connect them or to deal with intersecting dynamics of domination in co-operation in other ways. (3) What do 'critical theories/theorists' look like and act like in self-organizing groups and communities? How are they recognized when they take unfamiliar (or 'undesirable') forms? What makes the promises of theory liberating and enlightening in these spaces, and what turns it into a resource for judgement, hierarchy, silencing and exclusion? How can we develop epistemologically autonomous relationships to the work of Marx, Marxists or any professionalized/canonized theory, and is it important that people do?

**Dan Ozarow (Middlesex)** *The question of whether workers can sustain self-managed cooperatives as 'islands of socialism in a sea of capitalism' has long been debated amongst Marxists. Drawing upon research from the experiences of current self-management projects in Argentina and Europe, this paper re-evaluates this age-old question. It argues that the extent to which characteristics such as worker control, collective interests, wage equality, the absence of exploitation, non-capitalist subjectivities, autonomy and the rupturing of capitalist logic can emerge and be maintained within them depends on the extent to which they can develop economic, social and political ties to the solidarity economy rather to prevent them from being subsumed in the capitalist sea.*

**Sean Farnelo (Students For Cooperation)**

**15:00 – 15:15 COFFEE BREAK**

**15:15- 16:45 MONEY & ALTERNATIVES**

**Ciaran Mundy (The Bristol Pound)**

**Graham Taylor (UWE) LETS Abolish Money? Is there a Community Outside the Community of Money?** *My contribution will explore and evaluate community initiatives such as Local Exchange and Trading Schemes (LETS) through the application of Marx's critical analysis of the money form in capitalist society (Originally published in Neary & Taylor, 1998). Advocates of LETS schemes argue that these schemes have the potential to overcome the alienation of the capitalist money form and provide the basis of the building of sustainable communities. I subject these claims to the analytical rigour of the historical materialist perspective and the analysis of money developed by Marx in both his early 'philosophical' writings and the later accounts developed in Capital and the Grundrisse. I will argue that Marx's approach is highly relevant in analysing LETS for two main reasons. First, Marx developed his own theory of money in the context of a monetary crisis and in opposition to opponents such as Proudhon who believed that the contradictions of capitalism could be overcome through the reform of the money system. Second, a major preoccupation of Marx was the way in which money destroyed communities and the way in which the abstract regulation of society through money and the law resulted in mystified and fettered struggles to re-invent communities on the basis of religion, nationality and locale. In other words, Marx's approach allows us to explore both the value relations underlying the development and operation of LETS and the way in which LETS constitute a fettered and mystified reaction to the alienating contradictions of the money-form. (see Neary, M. & Taylor, G. (1998) Money and the Human Condition Basingstoke: Macmillan/New York St. Martin's Press)*

**Criticicuffs (London) Bitcoin: Finally Fair Money?** *Bitcoin is perhaps the most well-known attempt at an alternative money. By looking at what Bitcoin does to realise this goal, we want to explain what it means to attempt to create a money. Through this, we want to show that alternative monies (on the Internet or not) are no tools for positive social change. Instead, they rely on social relations which mean poverty and domination.*

**16:45 – 17:30 CLOSING SESSION/DISCUSSION**

**17:30 DRINKS (Parade Bar)**