

'If "Marxists" would only read Marx': The significance of Simon Clarke's Marxism

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Abstract

Simon Clarke was an original and consistent Marxist thinker. From an early stage in his career, he independently developed a cogent, non-dogmatic reading of Marx's work that ran against the grain of the dominant variants of Marx of his day. In this piece, we delineate the main features of Clarke's Marxism through a reading of an early essay, first drafted in 1970. We highlight his critique of ideology, his focus on the forms through which the social relations of production appear and his insistence on the unity of theory and history – the conviction that the class struggle is expressed in the concrete movement of history. These features would form the bedrock of his truly significant contribution over five decades.

Keywords

class struggle, critique of Althusserian structuralism, ideology, Marxism, production

In 1970, aged just 24 years, Simon Clarke penned a scathing critique of the structuralist Marxist philosophy of Louis Althusser. Althusser was at that time a towering presence among Western European Left intellectuals. Over the next decade, and to an extent

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Clarke later admitted he was naïve to not have foreseen,¹ Althusser's project to expunge Marx's work of its 'humanist' content would go on to exercise even greater intellectual and political influence, including among various forerunners of what would become post-structuralism. Yet in that essay, which bristles with antipathy towards Althusserianism and its acolytes from the get-go, Clarke appealed to readers to resist the pull of the prevailing current of Marxist thought. Read Marx for yourself and with an open mind, he implored. This had been Clarke's own instinct. His attentiveness to 'what Marx says, *and what Marx says he is saying*' (Clarke 1980: 27) shines through the pages of that early essay. And it had paid off. Even at that relatively young age, his grasp of Marx's method and of the critique of political economy was impressively accomplished and full. The result was a veritable tour de force, a devastating indictment of the theoretical inconsistencies of Althusserian structuralism, its dogmatic inability to break with Stalinism and its affinities with bourgeois sociology.

We begin our tribute to Clarke with reference to this early essay in order to illustrate some of his most indelible and impressive personal traits: his humanity, his intelligence, his scholarly tenacity, his fierce independence of mind and his commitment to the intellectual and political project Marx bequeathed to us.² But we also want to acknowledge the originality and potency of Simon's contribution back then, and in recognition of how his reading of Marx *for and by himself* would form the solid and consistent basis of the even more impressive contribution he would make in the decades that followed. Given the historical distance of our present moment from that of the early 1970s, but also the degree to which the reading of Marx Clarke laid out in that essay is today the accepted vernacular among very many proponents of (what we might variously term) Marxist critical theory, open Marxism, form-analytical Marxism, or even the 'CSE tradition', it is perhaps easy to underestimate the originality and significance of Clarke's Marxism. In what follows, we point to just a few fundamental and consistent features of his approach, which he outlined himself in a few pages of that early essay – features to which he would adhere in subsequent decades, influencing myriad others, and cementing his own legacy in the process.

First, Clarke rejected as ideology *any* approach to understanding capitalist production as a mere technical question of the 'economic' production of use-values onto which juridical relations and questions of distribution and ownership are superimposed. In Clarke's (1980) reading, Marx had precisely revealed any such approaches to be forms of bourgeois ideology in that they eternalise the capitalist mode of production by making the "factors of production" . . . appear as relations already inscribed in the technical structure of the material production process' (p. x). For Clarke, on the other hand, relations of production do not come down to relations *in* production. This is a crucial, substantive point: for Marx, and therefore for Clarke (1980), '*the primacy of production in the historical development of a differentiated totality*' (p. 52) is fundamental. Both recognised that the production of life through the expenditure and development of the productive powers or forces of the human individual (i.e. a material or natural relation) takes on necessary concrete shape (and is thereby necessarily mediated) in and through social relations, which are therefore determined as social relations of production. So:

Production is . . . as a process which is indissolubly social and material, *production both of material products and of social relations*. Moreover, this unity is not a harmonious unity, at least in a class society, but is a *contradictory unity*: the *contradictory unity of the forces and relations of production*. In a capitalist society this contradictory unity exists in the specific historical form of the contradiction between production as *the production of value and as the production of use-values*. (Clarke 1980: 18)

It was precisely this insight, Clarke argued, that Althusserianism and its assault on humanism and the alleged Hegelianism of the so-called early Marx sought to quash (see Pascual and Ghiotto in this forum). By developing a structural ‘science’ of capitalism’s economic laws (related only relatively-autonomously to the ‘political’ sphere), Althusserianism reaffirmed its own status as ideology, as Clarke’s critique laid bare. And it was this insight that also informed Clarke’s repudiation of any moral critique of the ‘unfair’ distribution of assets, revenues or power among classes or ‘factions’, even as advanced by so-called neo-Marxists.

This first feature alone shows just how pioneering Clarke’s reading of *Capital* was, and it is worth throwing into relief the more specific intellectual context of his intervention at that time. On the one hand, the efforts of most Marxist economists were geared towards the mathematical reduction of prices to quantities of labour (the ‘transformation problem’) in an attempt to ‘logically prove’ the fact of exploitation in capitalism. On the other hand, precisely inspired by Althusserianism, the attention of the great majority of Marxist sociologists was mainly focused on a one-sided and narrowly conceived concern with direct exploitation and domination through ‘the interpersonal relation’ between ‘labourer and owner of means of production’ (Clarke 1980: 61). By contrast, although this aspect would become more prominent and central in his later books from the 1980s like *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology* or *Keynesianism, Monetarism and the Crisis of the State* (see Burnham, Bonefeld and Fairbrother in this forum) already in this early article it is possible to discern that, for Clarke, what set the Marxian *critique of political economy* apart from bourgeois social science was its discovery of the fetishistic constitution of value, money and capital as historically specific, alienated, objectified forms of social mediation in the capitalist mode of production.

Second, then, Clarke’s own Marxism was attentive to how the general determination of the contradictory development of the productive powers of the human individual is expressed in the concrete, historically changing character of the social relations of production: a ‘specific and determinate historical process by which social relations are subsumed under the dominant relation of production and so are determined as developed forms of that relation’ (1980, p. 19). In other words, Clarke’s Marxism homed in on *social form*, and his contribution to what might now be termed ‘form-analytical Marxism’ is significant indeed. The insight that ‘social relations are not technical relations but are the social basis of *both* the “economic community” and “its specific political form”’ (Clarke 1980, p. 72) formed the bedrock for his highly influential form-critique of the state (see Pascual and Ghiotto in this forum) and of money, as well as of forms of ideology in institutional academia (of sociology and economics) and of paradigms of macro-economic policymaking (Keynesianism and monetarism). Clarke (1980), like Marx, understood that

the social relations of production appear in specific economic, political, and ideological forms, and their determination as moments of the 'relations of production in their totality' can only be through their historical subsumption under the dominant relation of production in the development of the contradiction on which that relation is based. (p. 20)

The task of Marxism, therefore, is to engage in concrete analysis of 'the *forms of domination* of social relations by the capital relation and the *specific limits* of that domination' (Clarke 1980: 20). This is the red thread that runs throughout his subsequent work on the state, money, crisis, economic policymaking and industrial relations.³

Third, and consequently, Clarke was disinterested in the elaboration of abstract concepts or 'laws' – whether 'interpreted in the Hegelian sense of the dialectical development of the Idea or in the positivist sense of the deductive elucidation of the fundamental postulates of the theory' (Clarke 1980: 20). Rather, his analytical gaze was fixed, laser-like, upon 'real human history' (Clarke 1980: 20), which necessarily develops through the socially constituted and situated (antagonistic) subjectivity and action of concrete individuals – in other words, upon the concrete unfolding history of experience of the working class and its struggle against capital. This insight meant that Clarke never lost sight of the need to maintain the integrity of the dialectic of theory and history, of 'thought and reality' (pp. 45–46), always resisting any epistemological temptation to formulate and promulgate so-called laws of historical development in abstraction or in separation from what is going on in the real world and with the class struggle specifically. Accordingly, Clarke (1980) was unwavering in his view that 'the fundamental class relation of capitalist society' is a 'total social relation' which is expressed in the differentiated forms which comprise the unity of the circuit of capital as a whole (p. 62). Moreover, 'this relation cannot be reduced to the economic forms in which it appears' (Clarke 1980: 62) but is also expressed in differentiated political and ideological forms. And so, therefore, the class struggle through which the relations of production necessarily develop is expressed in the concrete movement of history:

In a class society [the relations of production] are differentiated class relations, and their development, under the impact of changes in economic conditions, and subject to the constraint of those conditions, is the development of a multi-faceted class struggle. This struggle is not, however, something divorced from production, located in some relatively autonomous political instance, taking the whole social formation as its object. *The class struggle is the form of development of the developed forms of the relation of production, an omnipresent economic, political, and ideological struggle.* (Clarke 1980: 72–73)

It follows, then, that for Clarke the organised working class – rather than new social movements, 'humanity' or the 'multitude' – is indeed the revolutionary subject (though he arrived at this conclusion via a non-orthodox route and in such a way that he never saw fit to endorse any official Party of/for the working class).

These are the enduring features of Clarke's Marxism that were already integral to his critique of Althusserianism in the early 1970s. That early essay showcased Clarke's own distinctive potency as a (then young) Marxist: confidently, authoritatively and independently expounding a non-dogmatic version of Marx that still impresses. Today, we

remember Clarke for the clarity, originality and consistency of his work that would follow over subsequent decades; as a source of education and inspiration; and as a lodestar for very many other contributors to *Capital & Class* these last 50 years. Thank you, Simon.

Notes

1. Hence, he opted not to publish his essay until a decade later (Clarke 1980). The main title of our tribute is taken from the latter (Clarke 1980: 27).
2. Those of us who were fortunate to know him personally can also attest to his generosity as an academic mentor and colleague, and his warmth as a human being.
3. It should also be acknowledged that Clarke saw the ultimate limit of these forms of domination as obtaining at the scale of the world market, making him an advocate of the view that the capitalist mode of production is global in content and national only in form – another distinguishing feature relative to most of his peers.

Reference

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