Sensuous materialism

Marx plus Freud

Moving on from Big Flame requires an adjustment to the Marxism that underpinned its work. I want to put 'sensuousness' back into Marxism — I am promoting 'sensuous materialism'. I suggest that 'post-Big Flame' politics should be guided by a theory that combines a Marxist understanding of materialism with a sociology and psychology (inspired by Sigmund Freud) of the affective dimensions of life. Activists would then pay as close attention to the emotional dimensions of life as we do to the material context in which people live and struggle. For too long, 'materialism' has been reduced to the economic dimensions of life. It's no coincidence that many critics of the 'materialism' — an obsession with the accumulation of the goods that capitalism produces — use the very term that Marxists (and the young Hegelians) coined for their philosophy. By parking the sensuous element that Marx saw in all humans as they make the world, too many Marxists have reduced their philosophy to the hard, physical, cash-based elements in human activity. Instead, sensuous materialism deliberately evokes the early writings of Karl Marx that included the adjective 'sensuous'. For example, when he explained his view of human action, and his critique of previous forms of materialist thought, the young Marx wrote:

> The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such.[1]

All humans — including political activists and intellectuals — are fleshly, sensuous, subjective, emotional, active makers of their own material lives; the philosophy best equipped to critique the world we have made is, it is argued here, a type of materialism, one that is equally rooted in analysis of the contingencies of physical labour and the vagaries of emotion.[2] Marx clearly understood the centrality of emotion in his early work on religion. Religion is not simply, as his less sensitive followers quoted, 'the opium of the people'; it is a set of intense feelings experienced by the oppressed. Religion is:

> the self-consciousness and self-feeling of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again . . . Religion is *a reversed world-consciousness* . . . the general theory of the world . . . its enthusiasm, its moral sanction . . . the *protest* against real distress

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[1] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845, in Karl Marx and Frederik Engels, Selected Works, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973, pp. 28-30. Available at https://www.Marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm Accessed 20.5.18 Italics as in the original.

[2] There may be a hint of this type of analysis in William Morris's advocacy, in 1892, of a socialism that promotes 'art, research . . . pleasure', since at least art and pleasure are sensuous and emotional activities. Socialism, for Morris, was not 'mere amelioration of the condition of certain groups of labour, necessarily at the expense of others . . . not to level down and level up till we are all sharing in a poor life, stripped of energy, without art, research of pleasure'. Cited in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris — Romantic to revolutionary*, London, Merlin Press, 1955, 1977, pp. 599-600.

> . . . the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation.[3]

Here Marx is sympathetically engaged with the everyday enthusiasm and spiritual values of the people, looking into their hearts and souls. Henri Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life* (1947), based in Marx's concept of alienation, inspired members of the Situationist International. Lefebvre utilised Marx's early writings to argue that 'the practical-sensuous' is at the root of the 'tools, language, concepts, signs' with which humans interact with nature to make the world. 'The unity of the sensuous and the intellectual, of nature and culture, confronts us everywhere'. As the human 'enters into more or less rich and complex social relations, which reveal it as "subject", [it is allowed] to exercise its subjective power — activity, reflection, desire'.[4] When the sensuous is re-inserted into Marxism, we have part of the framework with which we can explore all human activity, including our thinking, acting and our desiring. Instead, by largely ignoring Marx's early writings, the socialist, materialist left has lost sight of the full sensuousness of human existence, narrowing itself down on the purely economic.

Sensuous materialism would combine Freud with Marx. Later, I will have much to say about the narcissism that gorges on and is fed by capitalist consumerism; it is Freud's conceptualisation of human drives and needs, usually operating beyond the realm of reason, promoting love and hate, lust and rage — all the light and dark in human activity — that we need to utilise in order to enlarge our analysis of human existence. Freud and his followers (including Marxists such as Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse) provide the tools we need to make sense of the irrational and emotional dimensions of life. In their critique of reactionary cultural and political movements that appear to eschew reason, Marxists too often fall back upon the patronising concept of 'false consciousness'. Our critique would be much improved if we used Freudian analysis of the unconscious and the mechanics of repression to analyse, rather than contemptuously dismiss how people actually think and behave.

For example, Freudian thought helps us explain the intense fear and loathing of the Other that drives right-wing populist movements. Robert Young (1994), the Marxist historian of science and Kleinian psychotherapist, explained: 'The psychological characteristics of racism are splitting, violent projective identification, stereotyping and scapegoating'. In societies like ours where the myth of racial hierarchy has been naturalised, individuals split off the unbearable aspects of their unconscious and project these onto others. They coalesce in like-minded groups (which can form social movements or parties):

> The unbearable and unacceptable parts of the group and the individual may be wishes, fears, idealisations, denigrations. When they get split off and projected into others, anxiety in the self and the group is diminished. When the others take them up and behave according

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[3] The next sentence is the famous 'It is the *opium* of the people'. Karl Marx 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' in K. Marx and F. Engels *On Religion*, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1955, pp. 41-2. Emphasis in the original.

[4] Henri Lefebvre, *The Sociology of Marx*, New York, Vintage Books, 1969, pp. 38-9. Lefebvre produced three volumes of his Critique, available in one volume as Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, London, Verso, 2014

> to the stereotype, the projection is vindicated: in the "lazy nigger", the "cunning yid", the "crazy Indian", the "fanatical Arab".[5]

In general the left seems to regard psychoanalytical thought as reductionist and individualist. There are signs, however, that this hostility to psychology is diminishing, as progressives have to face up to the surge in support for populist and often racist right-wing leaders.[6]

Most Marxists have been too hostile to Hegel's idealism; most sociologists too hostile to personal psychology. Many politicos would therefore reject Michael Edwards' claim: 'Love – an antidote to the self-interested, mindless pursuit of growth and power that is the bedrock of our unjust economies – can be a force for social change'.[7] Big Flame in several respects was at the soft end of Marxism (we were all in favour of feminism; lots of its men sang on demos; some of us joined Men's Groups) but it never put 'love' in its manifestos. We should have. Most members would probably have worried about its romanticist connotations, its conventional implication that coupledom was the main goal of life.[8] Now, however, the necessity for a politics that places at its centre meaningful, sensual, emotionally empathic and egalitarian relationships is much clearer. Sensuous materialism is the philosophy that, by placing equal weight on the emotional and the economic dimensions of social life, can provide an underpinning for a viable radical politics for today.

Some pioneers of sensuous materialism

In offering sensuous materialism as a guide to politics in the 21st century, we recall the origins of Big Flame in the sexual and political liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Second wave feminism crystallised the 1960s movements' longing for a new world order best of all. This philosophy was well expressed by Sheila Rowbotham in a 1969 editorial for the revolutionary underground newspaper *Black Dwarf*. Appealing directly to the men who dominated the movements, reminding them that they 'have nothing to lose but [their] chains', Sheila Rowbotham wrote that, after gender equality had been achieved:

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[5] Robert M Young, *Mental Space*, Chapter 6 'Projective Space: The Racial Other', London, Process Press,1994, p. 93 and p. 96. Note that this type of analysis can be applied to leftists who are also capable of splitting and projecting, helping us understand the narcissism of small differences and mutual loathing among leftists.

[6] Wilhelm Reich's Freudian analysis of the Nazis, and Marcuse's effort to combine Freud with Marx were influential in the 1960s and 70s. A strand of feminism since the 1970s has enthused over Lacan's interpretation of Freud. These currents have had little support in the left, but, in 2018 the columnist Suzanne Moore wrote: 'Freud as a self-self-help guru killed Freud the revolutionary. But he is a revolutionary, and let's get him back as one. I have changed my mind about him because he changes minds. We live in an age where the repressed has returned. And it's dark, dark stuff'. Susanne Moore, 'If we want a different politics, we need another revolutionary: Freud'. *Guardian Journal*, 26.12.18. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/dec/26/politics-sigmund-freud-revolutionary-marx Accessed 29.12.18

[7] Michael Edwards, editor, Transformation, *openDemocracy*. Email to subscribers to Transformations issued by Edwards on on Valentine's Day 14.2.19. The wonderful range of human emotions has been tracked and defined in Tiffany Watt Smith, *The Book of Human Emotions — An encyclopaedia of feeling from Anger to Wanderlust*, London: Profile Books and Wellcome Collection, 2015. For a history of emotions, see Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994.

[8] Eileen Phillips (ed.) *The Left and the Erotic*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1983, published while Big Flame was in decline, contains several essays showing that there were socialists usefully examining these issues.

> There will be thousands of millions of women people to discover, touch and become, who will understand you when you say we must make a new world in which we do not meet each other as exploiters and used objects. Where we love one another and into which a new kind of human being can be born.[9]

Evocatively combining the critique of material exploitation and objectification with our vision of a society that nurtures new human beings becoming capable of genuine love, not the mediated, saccharine 'love' promoted under capitalism, Rowbotham here exemplifies a sensuous materialist analysis dedicated to utter transformation in economy, society and subjectivity. In her groundbreaking book *Hidden from History* published a few years later, Rowbotham offered an example of the need for this approach to politics. Examining a 1934 book called *Sex and Revolution*, she criticised the author because he 'reduces the relationship [of caring for children] to a task of mere economic production with emotion and feeling somehow detached from the material needs of the child'.[10]

'Emotional labour' is a term coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in 1983, referring to the way that workers are increasingly compelled to conjure up and display positive emotions in their facial expressions and bodily movements. Scholarship now abounds that applies this concept to the routine actions of waiters, flight attendants, nurses, teachers, police officers, administrators and others. Thomas Szanto pays tribute to Hochschild's work in a philosophical investigation of what he calls 'emotional self-alienation' focusing on 'emotional invasion', which he defines as 'a negative modulation of the affective life of individuals by heteronomous, intrusive factors and actors that those individuals cannot identify with or appropriate'.[11] Szanto also notes the use of the term 'emotional capitalism' has been in use since 2007. Emotional labour takes place in all kinds of domestic settings. A woman in Sam Bowers' novel *Perfidious Albion* (2018) took a swipe at the way that men had now claimed this field for themselves: 'It was, Jess thought, the age of beatified masculine emotion. Everywhere you looked, men were sweeping up awards for feeling things'.[12]

Studies of emotional labour are a relevant source for examining how feeling is played out at work and in the home. Similarly, some sociologists examine emotions across all fields of social life.[13] Sensuous materialism, however, has larger ambitions: to guide a fully humanised analysis of the way that we live today, of the material and psychological-emotional structures that influence our lives, and to provoke transformational activity in all dimensions of life. This type of analysis is exemplified by another founder of the women's liberation movement, Lynne Segal, a member of Big Flame in the late 1970s, who said of her book *Radical Happiness* (2018) that she was always addressing 'our *attachment to life*'. What promotes our well-being, she said, is:

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[9] Cited by Tariq Ali *Street Fighting Years: An autobiography of the sixties*, London, Verso, 2005, p. 312.

[10] Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History — 300 years of women's oppression and the fight against it*, London, Pluto Press, 1977 (Third edition), p. 141.

[11] Thomas Szanto 'Emotional Self-Alienation' in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XLI (2017)

[12] Sam Byers, *Perfidious Albion,* London Faber & Faber. Kindle Locations 140-141.

[13] See Ian Craib, *The Importance of Disappointment*, Abingdon, Routledge, 1994 and Derek Layder, *Emotion in Social Life*, London, Sage, 2004. Craib says this about the increasing 'fragmentation' and thus emotional overload in everyday life: '[M]ore and more people are finding themselves in lives which are "overfull" of experiences and that experiences are themselves highly variegated. They carry with them the permanent possibility of "falling apart"' (p. 110). Layder links emotion with power and control, but is otherwise apolitical.

> having friends and contacts; it's making life meaningful, together with others. Confronting the ubiquitous neoliberal rationality, endorsing only individual competitiveness — individual or corporate — we need to hold on to alternative ways of connecting with each other.[14]

Life, Segal argued, is made meaningful when humans form bonds with one another that are not polluted by neoliberal rationality. It goes without saying that these bonds are emotionally charged, and these emotions need analysing and working upon. In a similar vein, reminding us that feminist praxis is a major source for sensuous materialist philosophy, Lara Feigel has argued that 'It's more necessary than ever to form communities of insight and sensitivity situated determinedly within the realm of feminism'.[15] A core argument of this article is that a left variety of socialism will only have mass appeal if it speaks directly to this subject yearning in all humans for rich, deep, fulfilling social relationships.

This way of thinking was applied in examining the electoral success in 2016 of Donald Trump and the rise internationally of right wing populism. Coining the term 'emotional politics', Edward Sugden wrote:

> Ideology and demography no longer provide a satisfactory explanation for the results of elections. Something else brings this bloc [the ultra rich and sections of white working class] together — mass emotion which has taken the place of ideological identification. What unites the electoral victories of nationalist populists is their ability to manipulate affect, to induct their voters into a shared mood that usually resonates in the key of anger and hate. So could 'emotional politics' of this kind also be used to anchor a progressive revival?

Sugden answered his question affirmatively, advocating that the left create a positive emotional mood in its campaigns, employing 'optimism over fear, love over hate, care over callousness and tolerance over hatred'.[16] Paul Mason agreed. He claimed that both left and right-wing efforts to disrupt neoliberalism in recent years are the result an effort to reinsert 'emotion, and with it feelings of identity, place, nation and class' into politics.[17]

The promotion of 'caring politics' by The Care Collective is another example of the application of a type of materialism which takes human sensuousness seriously. They set out the case for the transformation of a somewhat top-down model of the welfare state into one which fully understands the emotional investments each of us has in caring for others and recognising our

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[14] Lynne Segal in conversation with Jo Littler, 'Democracy in the Making', *Soundings — a journal of politics and culture*, Issue 69, Summer 2018, p. 113. Italics as in original.

[15] Lara Feigel, '"A different way of living" — why writers are celebrating middle age', *Guardian Review,* 11.8.18. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/aug/11/viv-albertine-deborah-levy-rachel-cusk-divorce-menopause-midlife Accessed 11.8.18

[16] Edward Sugden, 'Donald Trump and the politics of emotion' in *openDemocracy*, 11.11.18, available at https://www.opendemocracy.net/transformation/edward-sugden/donald-trump-and-politics-of-emotion This article appeared in the section of this online magazine called 'Transformation' with its strap-line 'Where love meets social justice'.

[17] Paul Mason, 'A new politics of emotion is needed to beat the far right', *Guardian Journal*, 26.11.18. Online version vailable at https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/nov/26/liberals-politics-emotion-right-wing-populists. Accessed 20.12.18.

interdependence. They see this as a deeply political issue in which our dependence on the eco-system's well-being is recognised, and their analysis moves between:

> [N]otions of proximate physical and emotional care, through theorising caring infrastructures and the nature of an overarching politics of care, to conceptualising care for strangers and distant others. To think of care as an organising principle on each and every scale of life, we argue that we must elaborate a feminist, queer, anti-racist and eco-socialist perspective, where care and care practices are understood as broadly as possible.[18]

A political demand for a 'Welcare State' might arise from this new thinking. Meanwhile, William Davies has analysed what he calls 'Nervous States'. Subtitled 'How feeling took over the world', his book explained the deep roots of the current scepticism about facts and experts and the divisions in 'the body politic' — deeper, more personalised and more bitter than ever. He outlined some of the technologies that both promote and seek to contain the heightened emotions that characterise contemporary life. While Davies betrays less political affiliation than the Care Collective, I take his book as an unwitting application of a sensuous materialism that has no difficulty with embracing the history of ideas (too often neglected by Marxists).[19]

The heightening of overt emotion now suffuses everyday life, and is increasingly recognised by sections of the left. In the UK's Extinction Rebellion mass direct action in May 2019, a dramatic expression of this way of thinking appeared in an online call for communion among those grieving for the predicted elimination of one million plant and animal species:[20]

> Grief as wisdom, as a skill, joined at the hip with love and wholly mandated as part of an ennobling human endeavour — It is a time to be with others in honouring life and for grief to be more than just 'mine' and personal to 'me' – a time to be accompanied; to be part of creating a 'non judgmental human basket in which to thrash around in'. In the wake of the recent Extinction Rebellion what now….for those of you stirred, bereft, lost, angry, longing, unsettled, heartbroken, raw, unsure.[21]

Materialist analysis, inspired by Marx, Engels and Marx's daughter Eleanor is the starting point for a socially just response to the crisis of global warming, but that materialism has to adhere more closely to Marx's early understanding that action is powerfully shaped by the heightened feelings provoked by the alienated circumstances in which humans live. Grief and anger propel political struggle and love inspires our longing for a better future for all. A sensuous materialist philosophy would inspire radical thoughts, feelings and political actions capable of overturning the type of capitalism (we might call it 'digital-emotional capitalism') that has been constructed over the past

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18 Andreas Chatzidakis, Jamie Hakim, Jo Littler, Catherine Rottenberg and Lynne Segal. *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence*, London, Verso, 2020. Quote is from the Kindle edition, locations 272-275.

19 William Davies, *Nervous States*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2018.

20 'IPBES Global Assessment Preview', May 2019, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), the Global Assessment of Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services https://www.ipbes.net/news/ipbes-global-assessment-preview Accessed 13.5.19

21 'The skill of brokenheartedness in the wake of XR [Extinction Rebellion]' at https://rebellion.earth/event/the-skill-of-brokenheartedness-in-the-wake-of-xr/

thirty years or so.[22] A new socialist politics, however, cannot focus only on the affective dimensions of life: it needs to maintain its traditional focus on the practical-material field too. Addressing the needs of people for good jobs on good pay, high-quality welfare, decent housing in well-resourced neighbourhoods, a sustainable environment and excellent medical services will always be at the centre of left political work.

[22] In her novel *After the Peace* (2018), Fay Weldon wrote that 'the millennials' put 'feelings above facts' (quoted by Dalya Alberge, 'Don't be beastly to millennials: their parents are to blame', *Guardian* 28.9.18 p. 3.). This spasm of emotionalism has important sociological roots and ramifications. In an article previewing his book *Nervous States* (2018), referred to above, William Davies argued that the Enlightenment paradigm of divorcing 'fact' from 'emotion' has partially broken down, with contemporary nationalist populism swept up in a politics that eschews fact and revels in emotion. He explained how, as anxiety about terrorism in 2017 was ever-present, social media 'synchronise attention and emotion'. *Guardian Review*, No. 34, 8.9.18. Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/sep/08/high-anxiety-how-feelings-took-over-the-world Accessed10.9.18.