Ways of Thinking

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Fundamental to the practice of Radical Psychiatry, and to its power to heal, is a way of thinking that is dynamic and holistic. To describe that way of thinking, we must talk about Marxism.

Only in America is Marxism so excluded from the discussion of ideas. Elsewhere in the world, it is a living body of thought, actively debated, frequently revised, used differently by different people for different purposes. In Ronald Reagan's United States, however, Marxism is a dirty word. It is used as the major euphemism for totalitarianism, for "the enemy," for evil itself. As a result, we have little access to a major current in modern thought. Even when we use Marxist concepts, we may not know that we do so.

Radical Psychiatry is a case in point. The theory and practice of Radical Psychiatry draw deeply at the well of Karl Marx's philosophy. Marxism, being both a theory about reality and a method of thinking, provides tools to help people analyze their behavior and increase their options for change.

Marxism is one of several approaches to the world that came together to form the fundamental theory of Radical Psychiatry. In the late 1960s, R.D. Laing was writing vivid descriptions of personal mystification, how an individual's sane experience of reality is seen as madness by a mad society. Feminists were joining together in consciousness-raising groups and discovering that their private hells were shared by many; what seemed a "neurotic inability to adjust" behind the locked door of a suburban home became a revolutionary critique of sexism when multiplied many times over. The Growth Movement, and particularly Eric Berne with his theory of Transactional Analysis, contributed therapeutic tools to challenge psychiatry's oppressive equation of malcontent with mental illness.

In this exciting synthesis of ideas, Marxism had an important role to play. Certain concepts developed by Marx in a political context paralleled ideas in the new discussion of psychology: alienation, for instance, was a key approach to personal experience in the work of R.D. Laing. Radical Psychiatrists, examining the ways in which sexism affected personal lives and transactions, quickly became interested in power, and found discussions of the concept in the work of Marxists that both confirmed and advanced their thinking. Many of these ideas met each other while advancing from two directions: the personal, fueled by a quest for personal change, and the political, activated by a desire to change a society which appeared increasingly to treat people unjustly. In other words, Radical Psychiatrists adopted ideas about power and alienation, not because they were a part of a Marxist package, but because they described experiences they themselves were having, and because they added a crucial dimension of understanding to psychological concepts. Many Radical Psychiatrists do not embrace Marxism as a world view, but do find Marxist methods of enormous assistance in doing therapy.

What we seek to do in this chapter is to spell out the concrete ways in which Marxism helps us to do therapy by describing how we do three things:

1. Look for the material reasons for behavior and ideas;
2. Think dialectically; and
3. Understand what is happening in the present in the context of individual and social history.

MATERIALISM VS. IDEALISM

The concept of materialism is a cornerstone of Marx's thinking. Materialism is the notion that all human behavior, including ideas, values, attitudes and feelings, grow out of the concrete conditions and events of people's lives. Idealism, on the other hand, proposes that there are ideas which stand outside the context of time and place — in other words, that ideas can exist independently from what goes on in the real world. Truth, for instance, might be held to be an absolute concept, which holds good universally, under any conditions. "Lying is bad" is an example of a notion which many people believe to be true. Children are taught that "Honesty is the Best Policy;" should they slip, Pinocchio's fate threatens to befall them, and reveal their shame to the world.

A materialist might agree that lying is sometimes "bad," or at least a mistake. It can make problems between people who are trying to be cooperative with each other, for instance. On the other hand, the materialist would be likely to place the ideal of honesty in a context. It does not pay to be honest with someone who has more power than you do, and whose interest is in conflict with yours. To tell the boss honestly that you went to the beach instead of to the doctor is not necessarily the best policy at all. Is lying a "bad" thing for an El Salvadorean guerrilla to do to a government military commander? When children lie to their parents, sometimes they are simply being wise: It is clearly the best policy for a child who knows she will be spanked if she is caught helping herself to the cookies to accuse the dog of having eaten them. In other words, a materialist asks the question: What actual needs and conditions gave rise to this idea, and how do other conditions alter the idea?

Materialism in Radical Psychiatry

In problem-solving groups which use Radical Psychiatry theory, the process of connecting ideas with everyday realities is a very important one. When Samantha came to group, for instance, to work on what she described as an eating disorder, she was asked to describe what the actual problem was.

> "I binge," she said. "I eat in self-destructive ways as an expression of my self-hatred." She speaks of two ideas, self-destructive ways and self-hatred, as if they have very real meaning.

> "Give an example of a binge."

> "Well, yesterday, I went to the grocery store and bought two pounds of yogurt-covered raisins and a box of cookies, and I ate every last bit of both."

> "And what was the problem?"

> "I felt a little sick and I wasn't hungry for a good meal, which my body probably needed. But more important, I was being self-destructive."

Samantha has a couple of notions here which are abstract: that she has a disease called "eating disorder," and that her eating is self-destructive. Her thinking is a good example of idealism, because she assumes that binging is always self-destructive.

It turned out that there had been some compelling reasons for Samantha to have hit the sweets: "I had worked for eight hours without a lunch break in my classroom. It was raining and the kids were wild and demanding. I had two phone conversations with parents who didn't like something I had said about their kids. When I got home, the toilet was clogged up, and I couldn't reach the landlord. That was when I decided to chuck it, and went to the grocery store." It seemed clear to everyone, eventually including Samantha, that her impulse had not been self-destructive at all. She had needed nurturing, and had found it in yogurt-covered raisins and cookies. To be sure, she needed other ways to be nurtured that were more effusive, kinder to her body, more enduring. But her act of eating was neither "disordered" nor "self-destructive."

History of Materialism

Karl Marx was a materialist, as were many other thinkers of the industrial age. In the Middle Ages, the existence of feudal societies depended on unquestioned acceptance of certain idealist truths, handed down from generation to generation without question: that God ordained the power of royalty and Church, and that ordinary folk were fated to their positions in life; i.e., peasants tilled the land. These "Eternal Truths," or what we would call idealist beliefs, interfered with the development of scientific thought. The Church insisted, for instance, that the earth was the center around which the heavens revolved. Galileo discovered that it was the earth which turned, and the Church imprisoned and brutalized him to suppress his new evidence.

Despite the power of the Church, materialism gained in prominence, because it was a method of thinking which was useful to the newly developing technology of industrialism. Rapid change, the discovery of new lands, the exploration for raw materials, the invention of new tools for manufacturing, demanded a changed world view. The idealist belief, for instance, that serfs were born to their station in life and would be damned if they left the land, conflicted with the need for a new urban work force. Industrialization required a weakening of the ideological as well as the economic power of Church and monarchy. The philosophy of materialism grew from the needs and experiences of the time, a process which in itself is testament to the validity of the concept of materialism.

Freud and Idealism

While a materialist approach is a development of modern industrial times, it is in fact applied with inconsistency. Materialism is a fundamental cornerstone of scientific thought in our age. Yet it is rarely applied to the study of psychology. Freud's work, for instance, is at its root idealist.[1] An example is his assumption that some "abnormal behavior" is related to an unresolved Oedipal complex: "...the child's two primal wishes (i.e. to slay his father and marry his mother) (the) insufficient repression or...re-awakening (of which) forms the nucleus of perhaps all neuroses."[2] In this concept are several ideas which stand outside time and beyond evidence: that all children are sexually attracted to their opposite-sex parent, an experience which is difficult or impossible to remember as adults; that individuals who fail to resolve this attraction by "sufficient repression" may suffer subsequent aberrant behavior; and finally that behavior which is aberrant is neurotic (implying undesirability). An observable consequence (behavior which deviates from the acceptable) is here attributed to an event the evidence for which lies in the lost recesses of childhood memory. To deny the accuracy of this assumption is simply to prove that the Oedipal experience remains repressed. The basic idealist assumptions are therefore unprovable and beyond dispute, not unlike the religious concept of sin. Freud replaced the idealistic medieval view that demons caused aberrant behavior with the idealistic Victorian view that insufficiently repressed sexuality causes mental illness.

Finding the Materialist Basis

Samantha's thinking about her problems is idealist in nature: she is convinced that she eats in order to damage herself. The idea that she wants to hurt herself causes her to feel scared and depressed, and then she eats more. The more she binges, the more convinced she is that her original assumption is correct: she eats what is not good for her body, therefore she acts self-destructively, and binging is caused by her self-destructive inclinations.

"What were you in fact thinking and feeling while you ate the raisins and cookies yesterday?" we ask.

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[1] In Chapter 14 we present an elaborated comparison of psychodynamic theory and Radical Psychiatry.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *Basic Writings*, Modern Library, 1938, p. 908.

"I was exhausted and frustrated. I wanted something sweet, quick and easy. They tasted good, and it was the first thing all day that felt good, even though I knew at the time it was wrong to eat them. I kept saying to myself, 'Just one more and then I'll cook myself a proper meal.' But I didn't really want to cook, I just wanted to sit in front of the TV and eat sweet things."

According to the evidence of Samantha's own words, she is eating, not to hurt herself, but to nurture herself. She has sought out something that is easy to obtain that gives her pleasure. Her body may indeed suffer in the long run, but she has confused that result with her motivation for acting, a confusion which sprang from an idea others had told her: that binging is self-destructive behavior. She does in fact have a problem, or, more accurately, several problems: she needs more nurturing, literally more "sweetness" in her life. She works too hard, has too little relief. She hasn't the energy after her grueling work-day to cook for herself. In addition, having eaten sweets and nothing else, she is more tired the next day, less able to solve the problems on the original list. Eating so many raisins and cookies is not, in the abstract, a problem. If Samantha's body were well nourished and her spirit well cared for, it might be a treat to gorge on sweets now and then. In part, it is her accusatory way of thinking about her eating behavior that helps to create new problems.

Paranoia and the Kernel of Truth

How Radical Psychiatry treats paranoia (see Chapter 8) springs directly from our philosophy of materialism, and it contrasts sharply with the idealism reflected in the approach of traditional psychiatry.

The latter views paranoia as a clinical condition, a clear symptom of mental illness. To Radical Psychiatrists, however, paranoia is the consequence of heightened awareness. We are convinced that paranoia is a form of intuition, or observation of non-verbal data, and that it is always a response to something real. When the truth of the intuition is not obvious, or when we are lied to about the truth, then we create explanations to explain what we have intuited. Those explanations may be wrong. In fact, the longer the kernel of truth in the paranoia is denied, the wilder and more convoluted our explanations become, until the paranoia may sound mad. The Radical Psychiatry approach to paranoias is to insist, therefore, that the truth be told, that the person to whom a paranoia is addressed find and state the kernel of truth. When that happens, the paranoia usually vanishes, all the "insane" invention evaporating in the face of honest validation.

Nell called this morning, breathlessly terrified. A frequenter of mental hospitals, lonely and impoverished, she had tried to call the Women's Building to get help finding emergency housing. She dialed information and was given a number.

"I know I'm being harassed," she exclaimed. "I called that number and got a recording. It sounded like women who – you know – do things with men... I think they were hookers... they sounded just terrible. And they knew it was me calling, because at the end they even said, in this terrible, facetious tone of voice, 'And in case you were confused, this is not the number for the Women's Building.'"

A perfect candidate for institutionalization, you might think.

"What was the number, Nell?" I asked. She told me and I reached for my phone book.

Sure enough, listed under the Women's Building were a series of numbers for different groups housed there, and the very first was the number Nell had been given. It belonged to a satiric theater group called Les Nickelettes, and their wickedly humorful message (when later I heard it) was exactly as Nell had described it. I told her what was going on, and she immediately returned to a "normal" state, much relieved that the harassment was political and not personal.

Had I proceeded from the assumption of traditional psychiatry, that Nell is mentally ill and that her distinct paranoia is a symptom of her disease (a series of idealist concepts), I would probably not have looked in the phone book — or if I had it would have been for the number of the nearest mental hospital. But I assumed that there was some problem with the number Nell had called, that there was a material basis for her admittedly wacked-out conclusion. Treated like a sane human being, she in fact returned hastily to a state of rationality. Traditional psychiatry, however, promotes a circle in the opposite direction: believing without substantiation that paranoia in an illness, the psychiatrist treats people as if their paranoias have no basis in fact, and therefore he fails to find the kernel of truth, the real events to which the paranoia is a sane response. Treated as mad, people do in fact become more and more mad, thereby proving the psychiatrist correct. The tragic consequence springs from the paradox: Belief that paranoia is an unreal ideation does not permit the one act, validation, which would provide evidence of the falseness of the original belief. How ironic that a false idea is used to invalidate the truth of another idea grounded in reality.

DIALECTICS VS. LINEAR THINKING

A second characteristic of Radical Psychiatry is that we think in a way that is called *dialectical*. Dialectics are based on the notion that any understanding of reality is made up of a number of different strands, some of which contradict others. "Logical" thinking which tries to march from point A to point B in a straight line must exclude all the complexities — the sense of process, of how things change over time and within changed contexts. A dialectical view of reality instead allows contradictory facts to interact with each other, and to produce a conclusion which no single line of thought alone would have suggested.

It is a paradox that many of the same currents in history that produced materialism—in particular, industrialization's need for a science of physical phenomena—also discouraged dialectical thinking and encouraged its opposite, linearity. The word "linear" means going in a straight line. To think in a linear way is to construct a chain of arguments, each one deriving from the one before and ending in a conclusion. It is a useful tool in mathematics and the physical sciences.

Even in math and science, however, the idea that reality can be represented by a straight line of conclusions does not actually hold true. When Newton wanted to describe gravity, the old linear mathematics did not work. He invented a new system called calculus, based on different assumptions to account for the newly observed facts. Other mathematics, such as that used in quantum mechanics, have been created more recently to describe newly discovered atomic phenomena.

Linear thinking does not allow for contradictions. The number two always represents the same quantity; two plus two are always four. Basic rules can be relied upon: two plus three are the same as three plus two, for example. Linear mathematics would fall apart if two plus three did not equal three plus two under certain circumstances. Linear thinking is adequate where conditions are simple. Where they are not, in conditions of relativity for instance, three plus two do not in fact necessarily equal two plus three and linear math is not useful.

Marx disagreed with a linear view of history and economics. Instead he relied upon a dialiectical method of thinking which had been articulated by Hegel. The dialectic describes several characteristics of reality:

1. Everything changes. It is the impulse of our media-bound culture to pretend to capture reality in a moment and to codify it: "Coke Is Better." "Communism Is Bad." "Motherhood Is Good." "Alcoholism Is a Disease." Nowhere is it considered that motherhood may have been different, better, worse, or otherwise fifty years ago than it is now. Linear thinking tends to view reality as static rather than dynamic. A corollary is that dialectical thinking sees everything as a composite of its past and its present: everything has a history, and that history is a part of what it is in the here and now. "Truth," too, our ideas of which are materially rooted, changes constantly.

2. Reality is contradictory. Meanings change, therefore, depending on the context. Bill considers himself to have a learning disability. It is true that his nervous system works in such a way that he reads books slowly. In the context of a school system which relies almost entirely on the written word, he is in fact disabled. But when he walks in the forest, he has a high level of skill: he notes and understands and remembers every nuance of flower and animal. In the context of the forest, he is not in the least learning-disabled. His perceptual apparatus works in contradictory ways: acutely in the world, blurrily when addressing the written word. That contradiction determines whether or not he is learning-disabled depending entirely upon the context.

3. Everything is connected. Changes and contradictions happen in relationship to each other. Ruth wants Sara to like her, is nervous in Sara's presence, and speaks softly. Sara is irritated by Ruth's little voice, and is curt with her. Ruth, who elsewhere may be self-assured, stumbles over her words. Sara, who under other conditions may be warm and friendly, becomes more distant. Ruth concludes Sara is cold; Sara decides Ruth is dumb. Neither sees the connection between herself and the other. Neither is the person she would be in the absence of the other. Who each is at this moment is intricately connected with who the other is.

Combating The Pig with Dialectics

One major way the concept of dialectics is used in Radical Psychiatry is through the concept of fighting Internalized Oppression, or the Pig (see Chapter 5). The ideology of the Pig relies on the absence of dialectical scrutiny. We are taught false notions about ourselves and the world from the time we are infants. We learn to believe that we are lazy, stupid, ugly, sick, bad, crazy and deserve to die. Each of these ideas is an abstraction (lazy when? why? by whose definition?), an absolute, exempt from time and place, without history or context.

In short, the Pig speaks in an idealist tongue. By the very nature of its being, it invades our psyches with the value-system of our society. The method is the message: there is no room for contradiction or change; things stand in static isolation. What we learn is to distrust ourselves and our peers, to view the world as lone individuals bound to a code of rules which determine how we are supposed to behave and what we can and, more importantly, cannot expect from others.

"The Pig" is shorthand for the notion of Internalized Oppression. The very structure of the thought process of the Pig is the vehicle by which we internalize it. Its emphatic, ahistoric formulation is a warning against critical examination. It will not tolerate scrutiny, for its function is to oppress, and it carries into the interior of our heads all the authority of those outside us with power to be oppressive.

We live in an age when discreet coercion is the preferred mode of wielding power. Why would most of us remain docilely in lives that make us neither happy nor secure, if we did not think a whole set of thoughts that induce us to stay in line? If we lived in a society where a man stood at the door with a gun, we would know clearly the nature of our coercion. If we lived in a time when options did not exist, when the tribe was isolated and the roots there to be gathered, we would need no coercion. But we live in a complex society, where some prosper and others don't. We are taught that anyone can rise to prosperity, and that failure to do so is a personal failure: the black unemployed teenage boy is unemployed because he is too lazy, angry, stubborn, stupid; if he'd clean up his act, he too could become a lawyer. We may see through this argument in its extreme, when it is applied to a teenager-of-color. But what about ourselves? Who among us does not suffer a sneaking doubt that we would be richer, more respected, better loved, if only we worked a bit harder, were more talented, smarter, thinner? Free of that doubt might we not challenge the inequalities of our world more ardently and more successfully?

If the Pig thinks linearly, intuition is a good example of a dialectical form of thinking. Intuition notices complex and contradictory evidences, and leaps to a recognition of reality which could not be perceived by any piece of evidence

in isolation. Mary notes that Susan's shoulders slump, her voice is lackluster, her smile is strained. Susan says, "I love you and I am happy to see you." But her manner does not seem happy or, if loving, very energetically so. Mary sees Susan's behavior of the moment and Mary's knows something of Susan from the past: that Susan infrequently complains when she is ill or depressed, that she worries about burdening her lover. Mary computes all she knows and has an intuition: that Susan isn't well and isn't talking. A linear view of the situation might be: she says she is happy; I perceive that she is unhappy; therefore I am crazy. The dialectical view, however, observes the inconsistencies, roams over past and present, respects the emotional response of the observer, and comes to a very different conclusion.

Dialectical Materialism and Human Nature

As thinking creatures, capable of self-reflection, we all have opinions about who we are. Our views of ourself are made up of our personal experiences, plus our ideas about human nature: the immutable characteristics which come along with having been born human. Often, these thoughts take the form of: "Well, that's just the way I am." The hidden belief is: "I always have been, and I always will be." Prevailing views of human nature thus carry in them the idea that change is unlikely if not impossible. If I wasn't "born that way", then I certainly "became that way" at such an early age that I can do nothing about it.

Psychological theories tend to incorporate and articulate assumptions about human nature. Freudians describe the id, the very existence of which is an unproven and reified assumption, as being inherently greedy and selfish. This line of reasoning led Freud finally to believe that war and violence were inevitable aspects of human nature:

> ...men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved...; they are, on the contrary, creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbour is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him...[3]

Radical Psychiatry has a very different approach to the discussion of human nature. We agree that people develop seemingly enduring qualities. But we see these qualities as a result of the individual's history and her continuing interaction with the environment. Simply stated, who we are at our core — our feelings, values, thoughts and attitudes — is formed by what we do, by our relationship to others, to our work, to our position in society. Aggression, for example, is the result, not of human nature, but of competition in a context of real inequalities and scarcities (see Chapter 6). How we behave in turn influences and shapes others, who influence and shape us. It is a dialectical process.

Because Radical Psychiatrists think in terms of this interplay between me and them, between now and then, between here and there, we seek to effect change by working both on the structure of our lives, that which is outside us, and on the role we play, that which is internal. We are optimistic about the future and about the prospect for improvement in the quality of our lives, because we know that each change we make as individuals changes our world, and in turn changes us again.

THE VALUE OF HISTORY

To view processes in this dialectical way leads directly to an historical approach. In every moment resides the past as well as the future.

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[3] Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, W. W. Norton, 1961, pp. 58-59; see also Freud's correspondence with Albert Einstein.

An analysis of history is a key part of Marxist thinking. Each stage of history is seen to be an organic, dialectical outgrowth of the ones preceding it. Societies are organized in a way which facilitates survival with the tools at hand. Feudalism relies on agriculture and is organized to insure its continuation. The very success of the system makes possible a surplus production of cotton, which then promotes the development of a system of manufacturing to turn cotton into cloth. The new needs of manufacturing in turn require a new technology, industrialization, which creates its own demand for a reorganization. Once capitalism succeeds, it quickly generates its own obsolescence, for the prospect of a world with enough food and shelter for all promotes a need for a social system of equality and cooperation. Thus, each stage of society arises within the old structure, and in turn gives rise to the future.

As with societies, so it is with individuals. This view of people placed in the context of their past is an enormously useful tool of therapy. How much easier it is to change the present if we understand how we got here. How much more consciously we can choose our futures if we see them as an outgrowth of our pasts.

Our historical view gives us humility about our assumptions. We do not "know" that a client is treating us in the way she treated or wanted to treat her father. We do know that she has experienced problems elsewhere in her life and has learned some things to expect and some ways to behave. She may or may not be bringing that past learning to bear at the moment.

The view that we have learned from our past experiences and carry with us as attitudes and opinions is enormously empowering because it implies that we are still learning, and can learn new and different ways that are more effective than what we've known in the past. If we are the finished creatures of a far-distant and forgotten past that crafted our psyches, then we are prisoners of what we cannot relive. History is not baggage from which we must unburden ourselves, but part of a process of continuing, although contradictory and dialectical, growth.

John's marriage is in trouble. John may have learned in the past to cover up his feelings, because it was a smart strategy: his father praised him for being "a little man," his mother was overwhelmed with her own problems and was unable to deal with his. Today his woman-partner accuses him of sexism: being "out-of-touch with his feelings" now no longer serves his best interest, although it once did. He is not "a sexist," although he can benefit from undoing some learned behavior which is the result of one way men and women are trained differently in our sexist culture. The view of John in the context of his past is a kindly and nurturing one, productive of motivation to change. He is imprisoned neither by his past, nor by a static "Pig" view of his current behavior. Our materialist, dialectical, historical view of John points to a materialist, dialectical, historical solution to his present problem.