

## **CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY**

**Richard Dyer**

Can the celebrations of the centenary of Karl Marx's death be *Marxist* celebrations of Marx? Is the idea of celebrating a great individual altogether compatible with thinking in a Marxist way? And isn't there something rather uncomfortable about putting the words 'Marxist' and 'celebration' together?

The bourgeois media will have no difficulty in accommodating Marx's centenary; centenaries are something they understand. Not a week goes by, without some person of moment being commemorated for having been born, having died or having done such-and-such. The media map out their schedules with centenaries, but also thereby map out a way of making sense of the past as a succession of Great Individuals. Although conscientious TV programmes may fill in the background to a centenary person's life and evoke for us his (usually) social world, what they put in the foreground is still the individual who towers above this background, apparently transcending this social world. The very habit of thinking in terms of the centenaries of great individuals ensures this way of doing things. In so far as

Marx's centenary may provide airspace, we should grab it enthusiastically — but all the same are we really in this business of celebrating Great Individuals?

Of course, Karl Marx was not a mere product of circumstances. A certain kind of left reaction against the culture's obsession with great individuals is to see such individuals as something like the point of intersection of circumstances and forces. If we think of Marx like this, then we never once conceive that he had to decide to get up and trudge off to the British Museum to research and write *Capital* — we just think that somehow social forces impelled him along those drab London streets those cold winter mornings. But if this view is patently absurd, we can still draw back from the Great Individual attitude too.

For a start, who woke Marx, cooked his breakfast, busied about his happy hearth and home? And who cleaned the British Museum, opened it up, filled out the filing cards, did all the things that made his labour possible? In celebrating Marx, we often fail to celebrate the countless, anonymous (to us) people who go on making life bearable for

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others, who get on with producing the society in which we all live. Marx produced *Capital*, but all these others produced the conditions that made *Capital* possible. In celebrating Marx we may be relegating these others to mere marginality, exactly as our habits of thought do when they divide the world into great individuals and the faceless masses. The point is not to deny Marx's creativity but to acknowledge the creativity of everyone in producing the social order, albeit unequally and, as it were, blindly, not always knowing that she or he does produce that social order. In celebrating Marx, we must not be blind to the work of those around Marx.

We tend to imagine the world in a way that pits great individuals against the faceless mass. This vision cuts people off from seeing what power they do have collectively to contribute to their and the world's destiny. In a strike, it is each individual worker's awareness of her- or himself as a member of a collectivity that makes her or him decide to get up and go to picket. But it is presented in the media as a question of coercive or charismatic union leaders and sheep-like union members. We have to be wary of reproducing this Great-Men-and-masses way of looking at the world, especially when it comes to our socialist past. Besides, the great individual image is much more suited to the patriarchal image. The really faceless, nameless ones are the mothers, wives, sisters, charwomen, cooks, laundry workers whose labour made the great men's great deeds possible. Behind every great man, including Marx, is not the clever little woman of cliché but inestimable female

drudgery.

A Marxist celebration of Marx is a celebration of the human creativity of this dialectical and historical process. But *how* do we celebrate in a Marxist way? It is a sad fact that a non-Marxist would curl his or her lip in amusement of the very phrase, a Marxist celebration, leave alone a communist one. The image of Marxism in most people's minds is unrelievedly drab, dreary, joyless, colourless, humourless. And with some reason. It is not just a slur of the capitalist press, it is a reflection of dominant tendencies within the actual history of Marxist practices.

There are images of what Marxist celebrations might be like. One would be military bands and mass gym displays; another nasal-voiced folk singers in beery cellars; a third hectoring theatre groups performing to people sitting on hard chairs or skulking near the bar. The first are both too militaristic and too anonymous to gladden the heart. The second are too archaic and, like the third, too obviously sugaring the pill, not really believing in the sugar itself.

Marxist celebrations that are Marxist reflect precisely the intricacies of human interdependence that I pointed to above. Examples of this are the festivals of *L'Humanite* in France, *L'Unita* in Italy and the People's Festivals organised by the Communist Party in this country since 1977. There is a frank eclecticism in such Marxist festivals that is able to draw in contemporary sensibilities and the variety of ways human beings have of entertaining themselves by being together. The forthcoming festival organised by the Communist Party at

Alexandra Palace in June is about drawing together this diversity while giving it the excitement of imagining making the world better.

The strength of festivals will be that they are rooted in popular culture. Marxist celebrations can be informed by some of the best, popularly based aspects of that classic expression of political feeling, the demonstration. The mass media image of demonstrations is not always wrong — men shouting harshly, women strangledly, that this and that should be smashed, while alarmed onlookers worry whether it will be *their* family, *their* state benefits that are going to be smashed and grabbed. But it is not always like that. I remember one of the Grunwick (remember?) demonstrations when a group of trade unionists arrived complete with brass band; you could hear the sound of music before you could see them, and the swell of it as it came into view was real lump-to-the-throat stuff. Or on gay parades, there are always groups of women and of men who have dressed up for the occasion, in startling, colourful, outrageous, superbly imaginative clothes. And at Greenham Common, it was the ideas of a huge chain of women with linked arms and of familiar domestic and children's objects pinned to the wire that caught the imagination. Each of these has come out of popular cultural traditions, ways of living in the world that different social groups have created. It is this that gives them their vivid force and emotional appeal, that makes them enjoyable. A Marxist celebration will be Marxist when, like these, it is truly popular. With thanks to Rosalind Brunt.