

So what's so bad about capitalism?

Interview with Dr Chris Horner, 23rd June 2014

I am sitting in the staff room discussing what would bring more peace in the world. I tell some of my colleagues about a friend of mine who believes that if everyone ate a bacon sandwich for breakfast, the world would be more peaceful, especially in the Middle East! An academic friend of mine says a dose of MDMA every now and again along with a full-on clubbing session is so good at getting tension and worry and stress out of your body, that everyone would benefit from an emotional and physical 'cleanse' of the system. My feminist English colleague is outraged:



"That is such a male view of the world. And anti-Muslim. Men only think of meeting their own needs based on their immediate experience. If everyone had access to a glass of clean water every day that would bring about much more peace in the world!"

Another colleague from Cyprus chips in: "And a dose of sunshine everyday."

I suggest we ask Chris for his view, who is well known for his unafraid-to-articulate political views! I call out, "Chris, what do you think would bring more peace in the world?"

"Get rid of capitalism!" he responds immediately and assertively.

I need to know more about this as a sociologist myself. Why is this 'the issue' for Chris? Chris, also known as Dr Chris Horner, is a philosopher, author of "Thinking through Philosophy", blogger and teacher of philosophy mainly, but also sociology. You can always catch Chris in a corner somewhere discussing problems within and/or ways to improve society with a colleague or two. I challenge him on his response:

Why are you against capitalism?

Because it is an economic and cultural total system founded on exploitation, conducive to alienation – it is wasteful of human life –and it is destroying the planet's resources. What more reasons do you need than that?

What is the alternative?

The alternative is to start acting and thinking together towards ways of managing our ways together that are not based on the features I've just mentioned.. Sensible people on the

radical left are not utopians in the sense that they do not come up with detailed pictures of a completely alternative reality. I think that is an unreasonable request to make of them. On the other hand you can see both contradictions and problems in the current state of affairs which sometimes seem pregnant with possibilities for a future that is not entirely as it is now. It is the role of the radical left to press for those alternatives.

Who is going to listen to the radical left?

It doesn't work that way. Large scale social change doesn't come from lectures, lessons or academic books. It comes because people begin to find they cannot live their lives in the old way. The role of things I am interested in is to help provide a language for people to engage in 'cognitive mapping' (as described by Jameson). *Cognitive mapping* enables people to make sense of the time and space that they are in. But people who think of themselves as intellectual or as on the left or both, need to develop the art of listening to people who feel their lives need to change as well as telling them things. In fact, in many ways you can't say there *is* a left in Britain at the moment. We are in a position much more akin to the early 19th century. In a way we have to reinvent radicalism in the 21st century, building on the past but thinking anew.

Do you think people feel that their lives need to change?

Some people do. But my point is that radical change occurs when enough people feel they can't go on in the same way. That point hasn't been reached. You see precursors of it in the 'Occupy movement'. It may be reached- but nobody knows if or when. I think the alternative version is at least as likely (as described by e.g. Marx, Luxemburg): universal alienation. (Rosa Luxemburg posed the question: *socialism or barbarism?* It's still an open question which we shall get) Liberals need to wake up, as they tend to think the status quo is still an option. I don't think it is – the ground is moving below our feet. I think the consensus that sustained social democratic parties, and moderate conservative parties, is breaking down. The answer isn't necessarily radical left, but could be led by sinister buffoons like Berlusconi, the type represented by our own miniature clowns, like Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson. They *look* like jokers but actually represent a kind of populist atavism of the right. There is no historical determinism. It could go either way.

I think sociology textbooks need to wake up – there is too much description of all the theories that is flat and lifeless, as in 'name 5 things about –'. The neo-Marxist stuff on criminology is better, though, so it's a mixed picture. Sociology should 'wake up' as a discipline as it is a bit reified – a wider problem – I mean that there is a tendency in all teaching to turn what ought to be education into the production of bits of knowledge for later assembly. These reified bits of knowledge serve a neo-liberal agenda – they do that because they fit into an increasing tendency at education at all levels to think of education as training individuals for the workforce. It's important to be equipped for one's working life (assuming one can get a job) but there is an aspect of *Bildung* that also ought to be in

education: critical thought about the kind of society we ought to have. I am not making a narrow neo-Marxist argument here. At the moment we have a rhetoric of education which is belied by its practice. This is not the fault of teachers per se, but is the fault of the entire educational establishment, one which is imbued with what one might call neo-liberal values, if neoliberalism had any real values. For instance, we have an over-crowded curriculum, full of bits, which teachers dash through at high speed – not a problem that is unique to sociology, of course.

What is the value of sociology and philosophy as subjects in the curriculum?

I think the value of sociology stands to the degree to which it has not completely capitulated to that. It is a site of struggle – teachers have opportunities to resist the tendency to reel off ‘five things you need to know about Marx or Weber’. Too often students don’t really know what sociology or philosophy *is* at the end of the year. That is the indictment of the curriculum driven by bits of knowledge rather than education in critical citizenship.

Gove rightly gets a lot of criticism. He is part of wider forces of our time, but he is also an agent who is pushing an agenda. You can’t blame or explain everything with reference to him. He is both a symptom and an agent.

What about the impact of sociology and philosophy on students?

What do we think we are doing as teachers? Both sociology and philosophy teachers need to reflect on that. I have already mentioned the critical aspect. My experience of sociology has been that it has contained too much of a dash through discrete bits of a curriculum and that one has to go against the grain of the curriculum to make sense of what one is doing. The teacher has to make an interesting lesson to bring it alive. The teacher has an active role to play in this. Sociology has been perceived by too many people, including students, as an easy way through AS. In some ways the curriculum has contributed to make that the case.

Philosophy is subject to similar pressures – though historically it has had a prestige and a caché that sociology has lacked. This is an effect of ideology. Sociology was perceived as a left-wing, rather soft subject by some influential educators, whereas philosophy is a minority subject perceived as producing abstract thinking of a kind that has been associated with the education of elites. The specific challenge which has been exciting to me as a philosophy teacher has been to turn that subject into something where students from non-standard backgrounds could excel. ‘Non standard’ can be many things: working- class, like my own, where my generation were the first people to go to university ;another is to be in a family of recent immigrants, who within a generation’s memory was in Afghanistan or Somalia and are in many ways at the bottom of the social hierarchy, or until recently women – when you go back philosophy is white, male and elite. Here it isn’t any of that – here it is possible (though it doesn’t always happen) to bring ideas and thinking into an exciting intersection with a range of people for whom such things were normally regarded as out of

their reach. So perhaps the hackneyed language of empowerment still has some relevance here. Educational success is *emotionally* and *culturally* important for people, and it is therefore potentially empowering in multiple ways.

Would students feel that it is actively 'empowering'?

Some perceive it in that way and can articulate it – whereas some experience an empowerment which they are not yet ready to put into words, but which is nonetheless occurring. For some students it is just another subject to get a grade in. Some of the most exciting moments for me have been when students who felt they did not have a voice, have begun to speak, literally and metaphorically. I can think of girls treated as servants at home, living in overcrowded and deprived home environments, who have found to their own excitement and mine that they understand what Plato is saying – and can offer a critique of him.

Is this relevant to their lives?

I think the word 'relevant' is a bit of a weasel word. Is Richard III or Othello *relevant*? I am suspicious of the word because it comes laden with assumptions. You have to specify what this means in a particular context. At some basic level persistent failure to perceive relevance will switch a student off. But, part of education (which goes back to *Bildung*) is to take the student away from the immediacy of everyday life, so they can re-approach it in a critical and creative spirit. This can be transformative. So the question of relevance is a peculiar one in this context. The student has to trust themselves and the teacher that the direction they are going on is worth taking. The sense of mastery and grasp of their lives that the student can achieve might make the question of relevance asked at course guidance seem quaint in its naivety. I will add though: if the blunt question is: 'Will I get a job?' I have to say that nothing can guarantee that. But thinking well and critically is a transferable skill that never goes out of fashion. Both sociology and philosophy can do that. In a way I would like more of the spirit that I try to bring to philosophy to be present in sociology. I think it is more easily eliminated in sociology. For example, in the way that students come to think and believe that they need to know a large number of studies to deploy in an essay, which they then believe is 'doing sociology'. Many of our great philosophers have been sociologists e.g. Simmel, Marx, Weber.... In a way these divisions between subjects are for academic purposes and do not correspond with life.

Are you value-laden as a teacher?

There is no such thing as value-free discourse. Having said that, the teacher's role should not be to inculcate one set of values that would preclude critical examination by and of other perspectives.

In philosophy my values come in (as do every teacher's) because *every* aspect of life in or out of the classroom is saturated in the normative - ideas of what is desirable, what would

be good and what one would like. My beliefs about capitalism are bound to come in. For example in political philosophy I try to get students to think of conservative critiques of liberalism – I am neither a Liberal nor a Conservative – and the very fact that the students come to see that Conservatives and Liberals clash over quite fundamental ideas is an important part of the process of making ‘common sense’ seem less obvious and more open to question. I can then obviously bring in Marxism, feminism, and all the other ‘isms’ in the same spirit. I don’t want them to learn ‘isms’, but to think across different narratives and ways of thinking.

Sociology does lend itself particularly to discuss capitalism, though in the past I have found that ideologies seem to appear in little boxes in that subject with attributes that get reeled off. Whilst both subjects compare and contrast different ideological approaches, within education or the family for example, there often seems more room in philosophy and more time to make links and to develop arguments. I am not entirely sure why this is – I suspect the curriculum is part of the case but may also be the case because of the kind of students who elect to do philosophy.

Do you think your students share your views?

Firstly, that is not my main business! Teachers must avoid the narcissism of wanting students to be like them. However, my experience is that many second year philosophers leave here with a more informed, critical sense of themselves and their world, and this sometimes takes a politically radical form, but by no means always.

What would students say about the biggest gains to them of doing philosophy?

Different students say different things. One of them is the pleasure that some of them get from a sense of mastery that comes with persisting with and then grasping ideas and arguments that are not immediately obvious. For instance, some AS students seem to experience the philosophy of conceptual schemes as a kind of revelation because it opens up exciting vistas about the way in which the mind and language shape our world. Kant’s idea, for instance, that our minds do not conform to the world, but rather, the opposite: that the mind sets certain transcendental conditions for any kind of intelligible experience. This is so far from our students’ normal way of thinking that there is a degree of pleasure in grasping such a frankly exotic idea, which then begins to make a kind of sense the more they think about it. I have a childlike pleasure in new ideas! And if I can transmit *that* to students, I have done part of my job. You can have so much excitement and fun and laughter doing something which most people never do.

Some students might gain mostly from developing much more sophisticated skills in critical thinking, and in the lucid exposition of argument and critique: good!

Are you pessimistic about the possibility that capitalism might not change?

Capitalism *is* going to change! My pessimism, in so far as I am a pessimist, is my sense that it is going to become harsher, more oppressive and less conducive to the kind of spaces in which resistance can occur. But, I am a believer of the saying 'pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will' and a person with the kind of views I have has to maintain a certain optimism that something better can be salvaged or created from the wreckage of a society like this, which doesn't deserve to continue.

Have you always been interested in these ideas?

I was brought up as a Daily Mirror reader, instinctively left-of-centre Labour voter believing that things got better gradually. My experience has been that simply by standing still, one becomes more left wing because at least since 1980 everything has been moving rightwards. However, I don't think I have just stood still because part of my core sense of myself is that I am a student engaged in a kind of *Bildung* who experiences two things: firstly, a powerful desire to understand the world I am in, an understanding that gives me a kind of pleasure; secondly, something which has always been there – a rage at injustice.

Has injustice been done to you in this system?

I have a great deal to be grateful for – the hidden injuries of class that Sennett has written about so well, have affected me but in comparison with the state of affairs I see around me now, I count myself fortunate and in no position to complain about my personal situation.

My emotional connection to what I do is that I came from a school not that dissimilar to the one I am now teaching in. I could have done a lot of other things than this – I have chosen to be a teacher. I do not regard it as the second best occupation to anything else. I am proud of what I do whilst still being critical of its continuing shortcomings. There is definitely an emotional and affective dimension to what I do.

Tell me more about the injustices you have seen that lead to you feeling 'rage'.

I taught a student recently whose mother went without food in the run-up to Christmas in order to provide a decent celebration for her child. This was a single parent family – the mother and the son had had no breaks in their lives, nothing had been made easy, the mother had travelled from Derbyshire to London in search of work, with various intermediate stages – they have always lived in precarious conditions. The boy experienced recurrent bouts of depression. He didn't deserve this – no one deserves this. The forces that would denigrate state education and the kind of work we do, regard people like him and his mother as, in practice, less valuable human beings than other more privileged people. That particular boy was white, working class. I could have told the same story through young Muslim girls. To be there is a profound injustice which the work we are doing is a small part to try and combat or countervail.

Aren't we simply saying that the mother couldn't get a job?

We are talking about cumulative effects of a systemic injustice that is all too common in Britain today. The place in Derbyshire that this family came from had experienced a heroin epidemic following the closure of the coal pits, which had affected family members who saw no hope and no future. No jobs, no chances. If anything is both political and to do with injustice, it is to do with that! That boy went on to study philosophy at university, doesn't experience depression now as far as I know and has become an accomplished writer. He very consciously attributes his achievement to coming to this school and having been taught by us.

Surely this is a 'success story' within the system?

No, because the life of the mother and the son continues to be fraught with problems that arise when you don't have enough money and you don't have the right kind of contacts. This is not a fairy tale with a simple, happy ending. What we have done here is help stop it turning into a tragedy. We have helped lay the foundations for a future that can be better than his past. He studied philosophy – which was one of the ways in which he learnt to find a voice.

Is having a 'voice' the most important thing we need?

I use that in a metaphorical way. What I mean by 'voice' is the sense that people have self-worth and that what their life is and what they have to say, has meaning and value. It's certainly very important.

Is there a place on the planet that is a more decent place to grow up in right now than Britain?

I can't answer that question properly as you would have to have a set of values that are quantifiable which you then apply as a simple measure. But data *is* available about inequality. It may seem like a hackneyed example but some of the Scandinavian approaches to education and social solidarity do seem to be in advance of what we have here, e.g. the view of education as a non-monetised public good that we see in a place like Finland. You don't have to be a Bolshevik to believe in state education – there are hardly any private schools in places like Germany. To abolish private schools seems radical in the context of Britain, but when you see some of our comparable neighbours, like Germany, you see that the apparently 'radical' or 'utopian' is closer to being a practicable alternative than one might think - in this case not having private schools. I would close them down. The way they are linked to the class system is problematic – the courage has to be found to do something about our inefficient and socially divisive education provision. As Alan Bennett said recently, the impression is given that nothing can be done about private schools, but it seems that every government thinks that perpetual fiddling with the state school system is always ok. The real results of this can be seen around us today i.e. a balkanisation of educational provision, a bewildering mass of different ways of schooling the young. Education needs to

be connected to democratic accountability, and this is intimately connected to the capacity to plan effectively for whole communities. This is not achieved via free schools, unqualified teachers, academy status or a *dirigiste* approach from Whitehall.