

# **Marxists Forged Through Personal Struggle: Counterstorytelling Through Lived Experiences of Becoming Class Conscious**

**Michael Hornsby Brown**

*University of South Carolina, Columbia, South Carolina, USA*

## **Abstract**

*Understanding what life experiences encourage individuals to learn and adopt Marxist perspectives will yield insight into methodology effective in teaching, sharing, and promoting Marxist ideology. This research explores the lived experiences of Marxists to highlight the stories of those individuals who have recognized the significance of the class struggle in the attempt to challenge dominant societal narratives. The counterstorytelling utilized in this research is coupled with intersectionality to reveal similarities and discrepancies in the perspectives and stories of Marxists and non-Marxists. The significant history and relationship of Marxism and Critical Theory is discussed in the introduction. This is followed by researcher positionality and origin of inquiry. Participant narratives and analysis are provided along with researcher reflection and potential avenues of further research.*

**Keywords:** *Marxism, Critical Theory, Counterstorytelling, Class Struggle, Revolutionary Consciousness*

## **Introduction: On Marxism, Materialism, and Critical Theory**

The Marxist ideology is one born of science, history, and disillusionment. It is an ideology that aims to be defined by its praxis and, because it serves as a countermovement for the oppressed, exploited collective, maintains relevancy through a devoted and adhered activism (Tse-Tung, 1937, pp. 6-7). As

capitalism expands the forces of production that simultaneously serve to create more capital for the bourgeois class and foster social relations among the proletariat that rely on these forces to produce a means of existence, an inherent class antagonism is manufactured (Marx and Engels, 1848/2018, pp. 37-42). It is in this antagonism, in the reconciliation of this contradiction, that Marxism is forged. This class antagonism creates class struggle, which in turn fosters and fuels related all social struggle situated in race and gender divides. The combative nature of the class struggle is defined by the reactionary on both sides. The white supremacist reactionaries of the ruling class are to blame for the exploitation and oppression of black individuals. This social conflict, this exploitation and oppression, serves as a tool of division intended to keep one class subservient to another, that is, the working class subservient to the production of capital, to the goal of profit (Burawoy, 1990, p. 780; Winston, 1973, p. 39). Similar tools of division maintain historical and current use against other racial minority, women, and LGBT communities and individuals (Wubben, 2016, pp. 10-11). In contrast, it is among the reactionaries of the oppressed where Marxists find home in their praxis. Marxists share the similar aim as that of their reactionary counterparts: the aim of class dictatorship, that is, the dictatorship of the proletariat. However, the motivation behind this aim is a society free of class distinction, class antagonisms, and class struggle (Marx and Engels, 1848/2018, p. 71). To accomplish this lofty goal, effective and accurate analysis of social relations and social conditions is crucial.

Accurate analysis of social relations and social conditions, phenomena inherently dynamic by nature, requires methods of analysis which inherently assume nature is dynamic (Stalin, 1938, p. 11). According to Stalin (1938), the fluidity of social relations and social conditions is made manifest in the social struggle – those contradictions which highlight diverging motivations and principles within society. It is only through the reconciliation of these societal

contradictions that social development occurs. Therein lies the relationship between Marxists and a materialist world outlook. To seek to collaborate and struggle collectively within classes of a society is to acknowledge a necessary interconnection and interdependence with others despite societal divisions, that is, matter and ideas not innate to us as individuals. Thus, Marxists rely on the philosophy of dialectical materialism because society exists as fluid contradictions beyond the individual. According to Tse-Tung (1937), “This dialectical world outlook teaches us primarily how to observe and analyze the movement of opposites in different things and, on the basis of such analysis, to indicate the methods for resolving contradictions” (p.28). Given the significant contributions through struggle to the aims of Marxism throughout history, dialectical materialism is coupled with the science of historical materialism in social analysis. History is littered with significant societal development, that is, reconciliation of contradictions through social strata over such time that social systems are replaced entirely. Stalin (1938) notes examples in “the primitive communal system is succeeded precisely by the slave system, the slave system by the feudal system, and the feudal system by the bourgeois system” (p. 16). I argue that the science and study of this societal development and the respective material conditions, time, and place that are responsible for such change is vital if the aims of Marxists are to be met and the future development of society is to be the replacement of a capitalism system built on oppression and exploitation. To Marxists, a contradiction in principles among classes in society is an opportunity for unity and organization. These opportunities must be grasped when they arrive as the tools and power to create division in society lies with the class that holds power, that holds capital. The societal system of capitalism is manufactured to maintain the status quo of division amongst classes, to maintain this dictatorship of those with capital. As Marxists use dialectical and historical materialism to study struggle within society, critical theory aids in

understanding the multi-faceted nature of this struggle created from divisions manufactured within society along segregated lines.

The relationship between Marxism and Critical Theory is not one without past controversy within the realm of academia. Critical Race Theory, the cornerstone of Critical Theory that advocates for racial justice by allowing for the study and critique of societal structures and hierarchies, continues to remain at the forefront of debate. The ability of Critical Race Theory to accurately analyze and explain racial divides and white supremacy has historically been a point of divergence among Marxists and neo-Marxists (Walton, 2020, p. 79). Despite attempts by some academics to water down white supremacy in western society into class reductionist concepts, such as racialization, that supposedly cannot be accurately analyzed by Critical Race Theory alone, Marxist researchers, including Black radicals, continue to defy critics in using Critical Race Theory methods to analyze Black American literature, racial achievement gaps, and the history of white supremacy in western culture (Hull, 2017; Love, 2010; Walton, 2020). In analyzing the class struggle and its derivatives, Marxism and Critical Theory remain predominant in methodology aiming to challenge majoritarian narratives and amplify the voice of those oppressed (Walton, 2020, pp. 90-91). I believe amplifying the voice of oppressed minorities requires the effective collective collaboration found in Critical Theory and dialectical materialism methodology. Other methodologies, those which glorify individualism and subjective perceptions above collaboration, fail in this objective. Wubben (2016) summarizes the following:

At both an ontological and epistemological level, the postmodern glorifying of difference usually takes the form of a claim to multiple realities, multiply knowledge without consideration for the consequences, as if multiple absolves consequence. ...

in difference there is no direction with the consequences becoming quite pointed—we end up submitting ourselves to authority, even if no authority can be located. (p. 9)

This relationship between Marxism and Critical Theory is symbiotic. Marxists critiques of society allow for understanding the origins and aims of social divisions and majoritarian narratives in society. However, it is Critical Theory that allows for the interpretation of Marxist and radical literature and research. Hull (2017) concludes:

With regard to the literature itself, critical theory, as well as working models, is necessary to understand the way in which Marxists handle literature – to note their approaches, methods, tone, proportion of political to literary analysis, and so on. Again, with black American literature, models would help; for while general literary analyses are relevant and could serve, racial factors introduce another element which may or may not affect the reading. (p. 596)

Understanding Marxist theories, motivations, and research, particularly from those Marxists situated within oppressed minority communities, requires a Critical Theory methodological approach. Given Marxism remains a synthesis of ideology and praxis, research into what experiences encourage individuals to adopt Marxist perspectives is vital to further the aims of class consciousness and collaborative struggle.

### **Positionality**

My motivation in this research derives from my observations of social struggle and contradictions within oppressed minority communities. I realize that my positionality as a researcher, my development and individual growth, is a product of the reconciliation of my own personal contradictions. I find myself firmly rooted in the Marxist-Leninist ideology. This ideological development, this personal identity, is one I arrived at through a journey of personal struggle

that began with growing up in a fundamentalist Christian household and the realization during my early adolescence that I am gay. Growing up with an evergreen struggle of reconciling a morality taught to me rooted in religious fundamentalism and a sexuality that cannot be ignored fostered in myself an early maturation and metacognition regarding my personal identity. This internal struggle plagued me and my thoughts, like it does so many other LGBT individuals, for more than a decade of my life before I became comfortable in my identity and reached an unashamed and full expression of my true self. Void of being dominated by internal struggle, I began to look outward.

Comfortable with my sexual identity, I began to look for my political and ideological identities. I understood what personal struggle created by divisions in society is like and I sought an ideology that seeks to remedy this struggle for minoritized individuals. I began research under the assumption that our current societal system is flawed: minoritized communities remain oppressed in a system that seeks to suppress their voice and exploit their abilities. After years of personal study and research, I arrived at Marxist-Leninism. My learning of theoretical Marxism and its application through Leninism began with a self-guided interest and research of theory written by those historical figures who lived a life of praxis in their shared ideology. Reading theory from those figures who lived a life of struggle solidified in me the vitality of praxis in improving material conditions for the collective and was critical in my decision to join a communist party in line with the Marxist-Leninist tradition. It is within this collaborative organization I continue to work towards the aims of improving material conditions for all.

I, like so many Marxists before me, felt the temporal reverberations of the Red Scare when deciding to join a communist party in 2020. I found peace with my decision in the voices and lived experiences of minority Marxists who came

before me. I feel inspired by the life and analysis of Henry Winston: the life of a Black Marxist, communist, and civil rights activist (Winston, 1973). I feel inspired by the life and scholarship of Doxey Wilkerson: a Black, communist educator vocal and unashamed to join a communist party in 1943 (Lyons, 2015). If these men who came before me stood unashamed to join a communist party and live a life of praxis as black men during the civil rights movement, how significant can my fears as a white man in 2020 really be? And yet, it is in the lived experiences of these men and those like them where I observe the contradictions that inspire this research. As I observe society, I see minoritized communities who, in spite of their history of struggle against oppression and exploitation, appear content with liberalism under a capitalist system. What is it that creates this contradiction in minoritized communities? As someone inspired by the successful and outspoken Marxists who came before me, I seek to understand why more individuals within minoritized communities do not yearn to learn from prior Marxists who lived through racial struggle as they now do.

As an aspiring educator, I seek to understand the oppression and subordination minority groups face in the education system in the United States and hone the ability to aid students in their individual daily struggle. There is no doubt that capitalism has and continues to seek to invade education systems. With the increasing corporatization of education systems in capitalist nations, there is increasing pressure on educators to restructure learning to prioritize teaching technical skills over theoretically based pedagogy (McLaren et al., 2004, pp. 136-137). With a bourgeois education system pressured to produce wage laborers instead of rational thinkers, it should come as no surprise that those same minority communities who remain oppressed under capitalism face increased, parallel struggle in the education system as well. When examining educational attainment among students in the United States, Cage et al. (2018)

demonstrate that black male students are less likely to complete their education than white male students, black female students are less likely to complete their education than white female students, and students living in poverty are less likely to complete their education than students not living in poverty.

Additional challenges to educational attainment for black men are evident in statistics that demonstrate increased risk of suicide for those with higher levels of income or educational achievement (Reed et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, black youth demonstrate higher interest in community service and electoral participation than white youth (Wray-Lake et al., 2020). I admire Henry Winston because his life of praxis radiates with decades of successful work and dedication towards fostering a Red-Black alliance between communists and black communities in the United States with an aim of shared struggle and black liberation. The potential for mass collective struggle in minority communities, particularly among students, is evident in the increased interest in community service and electoral participation. Research into how minority communities view their lived experiences of struggle and the historical figures who have struggled for their communities in the past will yield significant insight into how this potential revolutionary collaborative consciousness can be harnessed in creating a mass movement necessary for systematic change.

I would be remiss to not also mention the increased challenges faced by LGBT students. Kosciw et al. (2009) demonstrate that LGBT students in the United States are more likely to face hostile school climates than non-LGBT students with increasing likelihood of victimization in rural areas and communities with higher poverty. Research by Crawford and Ridner (2018) demonstrates that college students who identify as a sexual minority in the United States are more likely to self-report lower on measures of well-being compared to heterosexual students. Research in this area is crucial in the aim of unifying oppressed

minority communities for collective class consciousness. While struggle along divisions of race, gender, or sexual orientation lines may be not be immediately relatable to those who do not have to live it daily, all struggle is an opportunity to bridge divides in the aim of improving material conditions for minority communities.

This research does not seek to speak for minority communities. While this research originates from my own observations of contradictions within minority communities, I need to better position myself within the Marxist ideology before I attempt to give voice to communities with struggle unique to them. This research aims to understand the relationship a Marxist has with their own lived experiences and personal struggle. Just as societal development is a result of the reconciliation of contradictions within society, so to is ideological development the reconciliation of contradictions within the individual. In this aim, I seek to answer what life experiences encourage individuals to adopt Marxist philosophical and analytical perspectives, that is, the philosophy of dialectical materialism and the science of historical materialism?

## **Methodology**

Participants interviewed for this research are chosen with representation along a broad ideological spectrum to yield stories, perceptions, and lived experiences with intersectionality. Critical Theory provides a framework to analyze these lived experiences with the goal of improving societal conditions and fostering societal development. Critical theory, according to Love (2010), “privileges and makes central the experiential knowledges of subordinated people” (p. 228). Critical Theory posits the dominant narrative in society is socially constructed by those with power – the bourgeois class – with the intent on maintaining oppression and exploitation of those without power (Love, 2010, p.228). The aim of critical theory is to challenge the dominant narrative through the stories

and lived experiences of the oppressed. I seek to understand what life experiences encourage individuals to realize social struggle originates in class struggle. It is the unconsciousness of the collective that keeps them subordinate. The stories, narratives, and lived experiences of the conscious are what challenge the status quo. What synthesizes this change from unconscious to conscious? While I am seeking to understand the life experiences that encourage individuals to adopt Marxism as an ideology, that is, the significance and meaning each individual places upon their own stories and experiences, a comparison of participants with differing ideological identities will highlight differences in events and sense making (Glesne, 2016, p. 185). Each individual's personal struggle will be unique to them and their own identities. Berry and Cook (2019) summarize the following:

When engaging in narrative research for interaction and interpretation centering intersectionality, three things must be considered when investigating what we want to know: multiple and intersecting identities of the researcher; the multiple and intersecting identities of the individual(s) whose stories of experiences are being told; the ways in which the identities of the researcher intersect with the identities of the storied individual(s). Centering intersectionality recognizes and acknowledges identities subjugated to any and all forms of oppression. (p. 93)

The stories of the participants in this research must be acknowledged as situated within the identities of the individuals. However, centering intersectionality within this research will highlight any and all oppression captured by these identities and their intersections.

Challenging the dominant societal narrative through stories centered in intersectionality is achieved through the method of counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is a methodology that amplifies the voices of those individuals and communities marginalized by society and a tool for analyzing

the stories and narratives of those with power in society (Love, 2010, p.232). Counter-storytelling will center each participant's intersectionality of identities and place their stories of personal struggle within the context of how their identities construct their perceived realities. Counter-storytelling weakens barriers created by privilege and the majoritarian narrative by providing a means for individual struggle due to personal identities to be better understood by those willing to listen (Love, 2010, p. 233). Majoritarian narratives are those actions, values, and beliefs taken by those with power to sustain their positions of power (Love, 2010, pp. 228-229). To the Marxist aim of class collaboration and unity, willingness to listen and sympathy for shared experiences of personal struggle can be effective tools to combat dominant social divisions and narratives perpetuated by those with power. While our personal struggle may be unique to us given the intersectionality of our own personal identities, some of which are manufactured and promoted with the intent to divide, oppress, and exploit classes in society, promoting a shared understanding that privilege does not have to prevent sympathy for struggle that may be foreign to us will build bridges among communities for a more effective class struggle. Highlighting and centering the stories of oppressed or subordinated individuals will provide access to perspectives and lived experiences of struggle that may not otherwise be comprehensible by those who fall on the privileged sides of societal divisions. Counter-storytelling challenges passive ethnocentrism perpetuated by those who sit comfortably in privilege in society. We can reconcile societal contradictions created by majoritarian narratives to create societal development more beneficial for the oppressed.

I reached out to five individuals who I knew to maintain strong interest in political and social current events and media despite varying ideological self-labels. I interviewed each participant for one to two hours using a semi-structured interview format asking questions seeking to understand the

relationships between individual ideology and lived experiences. I recorded and subsequently transcribed each interview. To analyze each narrative, I coded sections of each transcript as they related individual identities to recounted lived experiences and personal struggle. I seek to understand how these individuals recognize and identify majoritarian narratives and highlight how their experiences challenge these narratives. Examining the first round of coding yielded patterns both within and between participant interviews. I performed a second round of coding with respect to these patterns, seeking to understand how lived experiences influenced current ideology. Examples of patterns highlighted during coding process were religious influence, personal struggle, observed struggle, collaboration, and class consciousness.

## **Analysis**

### George

I asked George to be a participant because I knew from prior experience George self-labels as a conservative. I know this because George is my father. I decided to interview George because I knew rapport and forthcomingness would not be a concern despite our ideological differences, nor would either of us feel the need to embellish, skew, or slant any narrative or analysis. While we have had many conversations regarding ideology and world-outlook, I approached the interview excited to analyze a narrative from someone with an ideology so foreign to my own despite our lifelong interactions. Given that we've both lived in the same state of South Carolina our entire lives, for George that makes 58 years, I was also excited to compare his narrative to mine.

George places emphasis on lived experiences due a strong belief in personal accountability. When questioned about where he places credibility and expertise in daily life, George responded:

I can only go by my life, my experiences. Not anyone else's. I'm not an expert on life but I'm an expert on how I feel I should live my life. ... If I want more I should strive more. And that's with anyone. Don't give up. I mean, I know it's harder for some people because they didn't have, they weren't born into, I guess, the life I was born into, but if I want to be better off than I am, I have to get up and continue to strive to be better.

The significance of religion throughout George's life was made manifest any time I asked for examples during the interview. When I questioned why religion was referenced so much in relation to examples of personal struggle and whether religion plays a significant role in the way he analyzes political and social events, George replied:

Of course, it does for my personal life, but not for anyone else's. Of course, it makes me analyze my beliefs more and my personal life more. And, I'm not always holding myself in check. So, it does make me analyze the world more, and do I want to be a part of this part of the world or that part of the world...

The synthesis of these two fundamental moral values – an emphasis on personal accountability and a lifelong scholarship and praxis in religion – create in George a participatory source of inquiry in relation to ideological outlook.

George's ideological worldview is the summation of his participatory transactions with himself, with others, and with religion. This epistemological subjectivity makes sense in the religious context of absolute consequence lying in personal accountability. Any analysis of societal interdependence core to dialectical materialism is handled with religious morals and potential consequences in mind. In this respect, individualism maintains a critical seat at the round table of analysis. George perceives this individualism as necessary and unavoidable given the social divisions already created in society:

To me the world categorizes itself. The news media categorizes everything. Politicians categorize everything. Even Hollywood categorizes everything. If you don't agree with them, they put you in a different category. ... I just have to judge whether I agree with their categorization or don't agree with it. And I'm sure in my mind I categorize some things. It can be a good thing and it can be a bad thing.

Despite these observed divisions, abandoning collaboration as a collective is not a forgone conclusion. When questioned on evaluating potential changes, despite previous mentions of hesitancy towards rapid societal change, George responded:

What are the effects of it? And how will it affect my life? My family's life? I mean, that's the only thing I can do. Is it going to make my life better or worse? Is it going to make the majority of people's lives better or worse? There's pros and cons. If it makes my life worse but the rest of the world better, what would we do? We'd do it.

His participatory epistemology extends to analyzing the perceived experiences and narratives of others as well. George questions what is subjective versus objective in the experiences of others by asking:

Was it harmful to them? Was it something that happened frequently or was it a one-time fluke that they want to turn into a lifetime event for everyone? You have to decide, I mean, is it really happening every day like they're saying it is or are there other things worse than that happening every day that they just ignore that's worse on them, or worse on us, that they ignore those.

Lived and perceived experiences from others are met with skepticism and hesitancy.

The individualist tendencies embodied by George are a development of the contradiction between society and religion. The struggle George recounts

regarding religion is external as exemplified in his mentions of differing personal beliefs from other religious individuals, potential dangers of societal influence, and, ultimately, the consequences of heaven and hell. Given these perceived threats, collective collaboration as promoted by a class consciousness does not take a primary role. Observed struggle in others is received with a grain of salt and potential changes in society are evaluated in reference to the self primarily. Furthermore, themes of personal accountability appear to leave little room for the significant impacts privilege due to personal identities can have on success.

### Brent

Brent was another participant I asked to interview because I knew rapport and forthcomingness would not be a concern. Brent is a lifelong friend of mine. In fact, he was the first person I told I was gay. Despite this, I did not know where his ideology stood in regard to any self-labels he might use. I approached the interview excited to learn something about my friend and what life experiences and stories he considers most impactful in shaping his ideology today. Brent is 27, has lived in South Carolina his entire life, and refers to himself as “painfully white” and politically “left-leaning.”

Despite growing up with Brent, I am ashamed to say that I had no idea our shared religious upbringing plagued him as much as it did myself. His first response when I inquired about life experiences which he believes to be significant is telling:

God, just growing up in the fucking Bible belt my entire life has, you can say that's definitely shaped things. I think its shaped things in the opposite way of what was expected. But it definitely went a long way in actually changing the way that I view things.

When I probed for more information regarding this religious influence, he continued:

A lot of it was to accept Jesus into your heart as your savior, but you know, it was always, there were always the undertones of things that were a lot shadier there. You know? The overall idea that you were to trust this thing for which there is absolutely zero perceivable objective evidence and that you're supposed to disregard all the other observations you make on a day-to-day basis in favor of this objectively imperceivable thing never really sat right with me. I do remember kind of having basically a breakdown at the age of 9 years old. ... This inability to really reconcile what I perceived to be some major inconsistency between what I was being told about religion and about how this relationship I was supposed to have with this omnipotent being and what I could actually see and the individual pieces, you know, not lining up for me.

The observed contradictions between religious authority and perceivable evidence fostered within Brent a personal, internal struggle at an early age. This early personal struggle created a heightened awareness for observing interpersonal and societal contradictions. Brent summed this up with his own personal self-analysis:

There's definitely a touch of anti-authority thinking that I've got going on too, and I've often wondered if that originated, you know, with my early, not relationship with religion, my early exposure to it, or if it was just already there.

There's an acknowledged emphasis and need that Brent's argues for in understanding what the majoritarian narratives of society are, who's promoting them, and what that person stands to benefit from creating this social division. Personal and lived experiences are primarily significant when originating in the oppressed, not from those with power.

Brent understands the necessity of evaluating and improving dynamic material conditions to better benefit society as a whole. Realistic, substantive benefit to society must begin with the idea of meeting the needs of the collective.

When I asked about metacognitive strategies, he responded:

I guess the strategy that I'm most employing is just sort of a reminding myself that decisions made when governing a group of people need to be made to benefit all of those people, or at least to ensure the most basic needs of all those people.

Brent embodies a Marxist collaboration to improve material conditions in this respect. Despite this, not all social divisions are perceived as tools originating ultimately from those with power intended to weaken class consciousness. There is a perceived futility in some efforts to realistically improve material conditions due to the severity in societal divisions. Groups and communities on particular sides of societal divisions are currently too idealistic, individualistic, or sectarian and thus render hope at beneficial change through collaboration futile. He summarizes:

I think we almost are forced into these outwardly idealistic approaches because our experiences have taught us that we're kind of pigeon-holed and bottle-necked and wouldn't even be able to realistically get anywhere if we tried.

There is no question of perceived struggle from others, only questions of how societal bridges can be built to create unity.

Brent was my first interview to touch upon what would become one of the major themes intersecting multiple participants and myself. Not only does religion play an influence in personal struggle, either through internal contradictions or external hostility, but produces a theme of searching for morality beyond a religious setting. Brent rationalizes this from his perspective:

I think one of the beliefs we were taught as children in a religious setting is that man is ultimately an evil being and the older I get the more I realize that, yeah people can be assholes sure, but no, no, people are not an evil being. I don't think they even come close. Some are, persons are, people are not.

Brent views his religious upbringing as a lesson in what not to do and how not to view others morally. Despite growing up in a setting that taught man is innately evil, Brent responds that “innately, people have worth.”

### Karen

My interview with Karen was my first one on one interaction with her. I asked to interview her because after listening to her address ideas in a group setting, I found her eloquent and sincere in her ideology and praxis. She maintained this level of sincerity during our interview and was passionately forthcoming in sharing her narratives and experiences with me. Karen recounted stories to me that are rich with diverse experiences and personal struggle and despite this, she maintains a refreshing level of optimism regarding the future and what it holds. Karen is 77, has lived across the United States including in Connecticut, New York, Ohio, Arizona, and Arkansas, and considers herself Marxist-Leninist in ideology.

Karen began by sharing stories of lifelong lived and observed struggle in the workplace, stories that made evident early observations of societal and class divisions. Karen summed up her various work experiences by saying:

I don't consider myself a troublemaker but there has not been one job that I haven't seen was... conduct was inexplicable, it was arbitrary, it was little Napoleons wherever you go, and always trying to make you submissive. Doesn't matter whether you're a line worker or a systems analyst...

Observations of the exploitative nature of the corporate world revealed themselves over time to be simply one facet of the exploitative nature of capitalist society as a whole. Corporate propaganda became obvious tools to maintain a status quo of leeching off the young or naïve:

And the poor kids coming out of college would work their 80 hours a week, devote their life, you know, trying to make a name for themselves. And corporate ended up taking advantage of that saying ‘Yeah, just put in the hard work and you, too, will be in my position someday earning \$500,000.’ So, it was the carrot that they did and they just whipped these kids. And of course, I’m older than say, say I’m 40, while these kids are 20, and at 40 I was feeling sorry for them. They really did feel as though hard work – the American dream – hard work was going to get them somewhere. And they had no clue that it was stacked up against them.

Themes of taking advantage of those who are willing to work and want to succeed in life are mirrored throughout all levels of society. Karen perceives this as evident in concluding:

I think a lot of people nowadays have been calling it the churn, which I think is very interesting that the terminology, that we’re in the middle of a churn, and it’s like watching everyone battle for their positions and even though it’s a constant motion it’s all on the same level. I mean, the whole political, governmental 1% rich population and those that want to control, it’s almost like they’re all going through this churn of positioning themselves and it’s, I won’t say it’s entertaining, it’s interesting because we can get affected by it, but it reminds me of robbing Peter to pay Paul. And, every once in a while, they like to dip down to the 99% and pull up some more material or resources and put it into the churn but they can only go so far.

Despite such obvious societal divides, there is perceived hope in unity and collaboration.

Karen embodies the ideal of trying to improve material conditions for all of society one step at a time. There is extensive discussion complete with examples from her lived experiences of the benefits in collaboration. She recounted a time when unsafe workplace conditions were ignored until she recruited the help of a worker's union. She shared stories of personal and financial struggle as a result of her husband's illness. She recounts learning that, in the battle against exploitative hospital bills and greedy health insurance companies, money for a lawyer was an invaluable investment. Lived struggle has revealed the need to collaborate and work together within society. This extends to raising mass class consciousness and improving material conditions where she concludes, "it's better to collaborate and with collaboration you have to build up integrity and trust." This embodies her praxis. She briefly summarizes some of her collaborative work within a communist party saying, "we're trying to educate, unionize, I mean we're trying to make little inroads in it and build up a little bit of a shell until the capitalists decide otherwise." There's no sugar-coating the difficulty in collaboration and compromise. She notes the majoritarian narratives in society promotes individualist tendencies between groups. She observes:

There's a whole bunch of like-minded groups but they're all doing their thing and they don't understand that if you've added all the individuals of those like-minded groups together, they could be a voice that could be heard. And that's one aspect that I am working on, I'm trying to get one voice out of a lot of groups. And only then can we create campaigns and create a voice that might change things.

Karen concludes that while capitalism and corporatism is intended to kill hope, there is always more hope to be found because "the power of numbers and the power of people when they finally have had enough is not given enough credit for changing some of the world changes."

## Christopher

It was Karen who suggested to me that I interview Christopher for this project. After a quick phone call, our first communication of any kind, he seemed excited and eager to share his experiences with me. Throughout the interview, I was caught off guard with how much diversity, experience, and struggle a man of 32, only four years older than me, has experienced. He has spent time living in China, India, Nepal, Syria, Greece, and his home country of the United States where he now lives in Vermont. He was born into family he describes as ethnically, religiously, linguistically, and historically diverse. His shared stories and lived experiences highlight and exemplify the influence such diversity can have in one's ideology.

Christopher recalls growing up hearing and learning stories of his family's past struggle. He filled me in on some of his family history. His mother's side of the family is from Greece and has a history in communism movements, fighting against Nazi Germany, Italy, and Bulgaria in World War II, and fighting against US and British imperialism during the Greek Civil War. His father's side of the family is from Iran and his father was involved in the Iranian revolution as a member of the revolutionary guard. Christopher summarizes growing up learning his family's history by saying, "I grew up in an atmosphere that was very much honed in on international relations, international affairs, international issues." He became aware of international issues and controversies such as struggle in Palestine and the dissolution of Yugoslavia as they were considered significant by his family. He summarizes this by saying:

I grew up in a very politically charged household. ... when I say politically charged, I mean that the atmosphere was electric with discussions about what was going on internationally, what the latest news of the day was, where things were going, what transpired in history, and learning from the historical lessons to build a better future.

Despite becoming well-versed in historical struggle at an early age, his childhood was not without personal struggle as well.

As Christopher's father is Iranian and Muslim, the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 were critical points of personal struggle for Christopher and his family. He recounts this experience by saying:

We quickly went from being neighbors with other American families to being the terrorists next door, so to speak, and I think that was very difficult and we experienced a lot of prejudiced behaviors and a lot of hate because of the fact that my dad was Iranian and Muslim and the fact that we, ourselves, were Iranians.

Yet, despite this struggle, Christopher views this time as revealing and clarifying in understanding how those with power construct majoritarian narratives to engage in exploitative imperialism. He links his personal struggle from the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> to these revelations:

We were constantly fearing surveillance by the US government and we were very careful because, in an instant, we could lose our livelihood. So, US imperialism was very real in that sense and I think that the most pivotal moment of that was the war in Iraq, the start of the war in Iraq in 2003, which I was vehemently against and I participated, as a young person, in protest against the war in Iraq. The war in Iraq started just as I was finishing middle school and entering high school, so it was a momentous occasion in our lives. I think it really galvanized a generation of young people into anti-war anti-imperialist politics, because we saw right then and there that the US was going in on false pretenses to overthrow the government of Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi people and created absolute chaos in the region.

This experience created in Christopher a skepticism of authority and the rhetoric and narratives promoted by those with authority. Majoritarian narratives that divide society had proven themselves to be untrustworthy in motive and

content. Propaganda must be viewed through a lens of capitalism and imperialism and the question of who stands to gain from promoting a given narrative.

Christopher said several things throughout our interview that highlight the growth in worldview that comes with living a life of diversity. Christopher referred to this at one point as, “the luxury to be able to think about the world in different ways.” Christopher is proud in the ability to accept diversity that has been fostered by his life experiences:

Growing up in a household where both parents are the same ethnicity or religion is different than growing up in a household where both parents are from different cultures, different religions, different languages, different ethnicities ... that diversity was so important for me, which is why I always had a very international, ecumenical perspective. ... I looked at the bigger picture, the bigger human family ... I think I'm a mosaic and I think that's the beautiful thing about life. We all are, in ways, mosaics. And that's the beauty of my political beliefs. It allows for that. It allows for the full expression of that.

Christopher is an example in the power of embracing diversity among the various identities individuals can have within society. Reconciliation of societal contradictions are more likely to develop class unity when diversity is embraced at the outset, otherwise the narratives manufactured to divide and exploit society become more powerful in promoting individualism and othering.

### Angelo

I could not have been more excited when Angelo agreed to give me an interview. In the journey to better understand what life experiences foster a Marxist ideology, who better than a Marxist who has been active in the communist movement for more than 60 years could help me answer not only

the experiences that shape this ideology, but also those that reaffirm it? Angelo is 74 and has lived in New York his entire life apart from a brief period living in the Soviet Union.

Despite growing up in a family with a socioeconomic status that he describes as petty bourgeois, Angelo recounts early observations of class distinctions within society. There were observations on the stark contradictions between what was shown on TV and printed in textbooks with what he saw among his classmates:

I was always spoiled economically. But, I looked over at my classmates in school and I saw the difference. Working class people had nothing. They lived in a two-room apartment, etc. ... The books we read, textbooks that we were given in class, were very different. They were sanitized. No pictures of working people, everybody was middle class. ... Everybody was white. Everybody was Anglo-Saxon.

He describes how the representations were also obvious because of religion. He describes the area he grew up in and the kids in his class as being mostly Jewish, and those that were not Jewish were mostly Roman Catholic. It was obvious to him that individuals in society were discriminated against because of race, sexuality, and political ideology.

Angelo experienced an early personal struggle with his faith as a Roman Catholic. He found morality in Christianity, but early struggle severed ties between faith and church. He confidently and succinctly outlined this journey:

I'm a communist today because I was brought up Roman Catholic Christian. I'm convinced I'm a communist today because of that. So, for me, religion played a complete role. Every Sunday, I was in church. When I was 12, I went to church every day, 365 days a year. Because the Roman Catholic churches were open at that time, the doors were always open and we had mass every day of the week. And I

mean, I don't know anybody who went to church every day except me and the old women, there were like 5 or 6 old women in my parish. They were sitting, it was them and me! And then at 12 years old, that's when – 12 or 13 - that's when I became a communist because I found Christianity in communism. I didn't find it in the Catholic church. I found it in the preaching that we're all equal, black and white, brotherhood, together. I didn't find that in the church at all. I found it in the party.

Angelo's faith emphasizes equality in society regardless of any individual personal identities and it is clear to him this equality will not be found in a capitalist system. Capitalism as a societal system encourages societal divisions designed to prevent groups from working together. He phrases this at one point as an "enculturation that each of us is superior to the others." The source of individualism is clearly stated:

This idea of supremacy, whether it's called white supremacy where you think you're higher than people of color, or male supremacy where you think that you're higher than someone who's born as a female, this idea of a superiority ... comes straight from the class conflict.

Angelo's brief time living in the Soviet Union confirmed in him that his faith-based ideology is well placed. The ideology he embodies and lives is the same ideology he saw embodied in the Soviet Union. He remarks, "That was what changed my whole life. To see a society that was running along Christian lines."

As Angelo reflects back on his life, he remains confident in his ideology and praxis. He concludes:

The journey I had, I found it refreshing. I found it uplifting. Money was not a driving force for my life. I live in a capitalist country. You need money to buy things, but it was never a driving force. The party and the Soviet Union were my driving force.

And I look back at my life now and I have no regrets, not one, not one regret. I'm even happy, in a way, that I never met someone to settle down with because it would have taken me away from the party. It would have taken me away from my life's journey and the Soviet Union. So, I have nothing to regret at this point. And how many people can tell you that? How many people can tell you they have nothing to regret. I don't know many, to be honest with you.

What Angelo worked his entire life to accomplish is a society that benefits everyone. When I questioned him about these views, he responded by emphasizing that collectivism is the essence of a society and the idea of communism is to build up everyone in society. Angelo mentioned during the interview that it is unfortunate the Soviet Union was deliberately and undemocratically dismantled because it provided a model for communists to see, a model that my generation does not have anymore. Unity and class collaboration in spite of manufactured social divisions can create new models for future generations.

When I began this research, I had no idea of what shared themes would manifest themselves from participant narratives or how these themes would complement or clash with my own personal identities. Despite interviewing participants with a shared ideology, I did not expect to relate to my participants and their shared experiences as much as I do. Furthermore, I did not expect for my participants to provide narratives that feel as though they are responding to or conversing with one another. For example, when I inquired about when collectivism plays a role in how he analyzes situations, George replied, "I mean, to me the only group that I care about is country, because we all live here. We all have to get along together." I immediately thought back to this moment when, in his interview, Angelo stated:

So, individualism, I feel, causes envy, causes greed, causes war ultimately. If you elevate individualism to a national level, it becomes nationalism, that the country that I'm involved with is better than the country that you're involved with.

There were so many moments during my interviews where I found myself thinking back to other interviews. I find myself relating with Angelo on his views and experiences with religion. The way he describes finding Christianity and morality in the communist movement and in the communist party perfectly describes my own experience as well. I, too, found a morality in the communist movement that I had previously found lacking in a church I grew up in.

### **Further Research**

In the future I hope to continue this line of research into minority communities to explore my original point of inquiry in this subject. I seek to understand how individuals within minority communities view the Marxists who originate from those communities. Why is it that the Marxists who have fought for their own communities over time are not more well-known and revered by those they fought for? What can be done to improve class consciousness within minority communities and how can social divisions be reconciled in the name of class unity? Ultimately, I aim to give a voice to those oppressed and exploited so that their voices, opinions, and stories can be heard and history will not be dominated by narratives created to divide.

## References

- Berry, T. R., and Cook, E. J. B. (2019). Critical Race Perspectives on Narrative Research in Education: Centering Intersectionality. In *Understanding Critical Race Research Methods and Methodologies* (pp. 86–96). essay, Routledge.
- Burawoy, M. (1990). Marxism as Science: Historical Challenges and Theoretical Growth. *American Sociological Review*, *55*, 775–793.
- Cage, J., Corley, N. A., & Harris, L. A. (2018). The educational attainment of maltreated youth involved with the child welfare system: Exploring the intersection of race and gender☆. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *88*, 550–557.
- Crawford, T. N., & Ridner, S. L. (2018). Differences in well-being between sexual minority and heterosexual college students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, *15*(3), 243–255.
- Glesne, C. (2016). *Becoming qualitative researchers: an introduction* (5th ed.). Pearson.
- Hull, G. T. (2017). Notes on a Marxist Interpretation of Black American Literature. *African American Review*, *50*(4), 591–596.
- Kosciw, J. G., Greytak, E. A., & Diaz, E. M. (2009). Who, What, Where, When, and Why: Demographic and Ecological Factors Contributing to Hostile School Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *38*(7), 976–988.
- Love, B. J. (2010). Brown Plus 50 Counter-Storytelling: A Critical Race Theory Analysis of the “Majoritarian Achievement Gap” Story. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *37*(3), 227–246. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/10665680490491597>
- Lyons, S. J. (2015). The Making of a Black Communist Educator: Doxey A. Wilkerson, 1922-1943. *Vitae Scholasticae*, 19– 31.
- Marx, K. and Engels, F. (2018). *The Communist Manifesto*. Arcturus Publishing Limited. (Original work published 1848)
- McLaren, P., Martin, G., Farahmandpur, R., & Jaramillo, N. (2004). Teaching in and against the Empire: Critical Pedagogy as Revolutionary Praxis. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, *31*(1), 131–153.
- Reed, D. D., Stoeffler, S. W., & Joseph, R. (2021). Suicide, Race, and Social Work: A Systematic Review of Protective Factors among African Americans. *Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work*, *18*(4), 379–393.
- Stalin, J. *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*. Red Star Publishers. (Original work published 1938)
- Tse-Tung, M. *On Practice and Contradiction*. New Outlook Publishers. (Original work published 1937)
- Walton, S. (2020). Why the critical race theory concept of ‘White supremacy’ should not be dismissed by neo-Marxists: Lessons from contemporary Black radicalism. *Power and Education*, *12*(1), 78–94. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1757743819871316>
- Winston, H. (1973). *Strategy for a Black Agenda*. International Publishers.
- Wray-Lake, L., Arruda, E. H., & Schulenberg, J. E. (2020). Civic Development Across the Transition to Adulthood in a National U.S. Sample: Variations by Race/Ethnicity, Parent Education, and Gender. *Developmental Psychology*, *56*(10), 1948–1967.

Wubben, Z. C. (2016). Becoming Through Revolutionary Pedagogy: An Interview with Curry Malott and Derek R. Ford. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 14(1), 1–16.

### **Author Details**

**Michael Hornsby Brown** is currently an educational psychology and research doctoral student in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina.

### **Correspondence:**

**Email:** hornsme@email.sc.edu

**Phone:** (803) 221-8288