Marxism – An Introduction to Fools, Frauds and Firebrands

*Presentation by Gerard Wilson to the meeting of Edmund Burke’s Club (Aust) Inc., at the Savage Club, Melbourne, 8 April 2016*

Roz Ward, of La Trobe University’s Australian Research Centre in Sex Health and Society, is the coordinator of the federally funded Safe Schools Coalition. She boasted at the 2015 Marxism conference in Melbourne that “in 2010 … I was the person who set up Safe Schools Coalition in Victoria” (SSCV). In contrast with the public claim that the SSC program has been set up to combat the bullying of LGBTI students, Ward revealed that the SSC has a far wider aim. These are some of the claims she made in her unabashed Marxist address:

> To smooth the operation of capitalism the ruling class has benefited, and continues to benefit, from oppressing our bodies, our relationships, sexuality and gender identities alongside sexism, homophobia and transphobia.

> Both serve to break the spirits of ordinary people, to consume our thoughts, to make us accept the status quo and for us to keep living or aspiring to live, or feel like we should live, in small social units and families where we must reproduce and take responsibility for those people in those units…”

> Apart from social stigma and discrimination, almost every single structure in society is set up to accommodate only two possible genders, male or female.

> Everything from the toilets we use, the school uniforms, changing rooms, all official documents, passports, the process that you go through airports, everything is divided into these two limited gender options.

> It should come as no surprise that Ms. Ward of La Trobe University (my sad alma mater) has a Marxist solution for this deplorable state of affairs.
Marxism offers both the hope and the strategy needed to create a world where human sexuality, gender and how we relate to our bodies can blossom in extraordinarily new and amazing ways that we can only try to imagine today, because Marxism has a theory of social change.

There have been several excellent short analyses in the media about the ideological meaning and inference of Ward’s proud Marxist posturing. I recommend Pat Byrne’s in News Weekly, Kevin Donnelly’s in the Australian, and Merv Bendle’s in Quadrant. The point I want to make at this introductory stage of my talk is that the great driving motor of the political cabal that has succeeded in infiltrating and holding sway over the institutions of government, education, and the public service in Australia is Marxism. Who could doubt now that the Victorian Labor Government is a Marxist government? The Andrews Government’s social agenda to dismantle the superstructure of bourgeois morality is far advanced.

When the understandable public uproar over the SSC program threatened to force the Turnbull Government to review its funding, Premier Andrews and his Education Minister James Merlino became very bolshie indeed. We will make up the shortfall, declared Andrews, if the federal funding was withdrawn. Red-faced with suitable indignation, Merlino repeated his boss’s warning and denounced challengers to the program of Marxist indoctrination as ‘homophobic’. No doubt he thought condemning opposition as ‘homophobic’ was all he need do. He had good reason; it usually works.

One has to understand that the debilitating bacteria of Marxism are permanently present in Australian state and society. The task is to apply the right antibiotics wherever there is an outbreak of its virulence. Unfortunately, the overuse or neglect of antibiotics can cause a resistance in bacteria which eventually brings about a transmutation – and an even worse infection than before.

With Marxism we are talking about an ideology responsible for a level of death and degradation never seen before in history. It nearly succeeded in inciting revolution and the overthrow of the state in Australia in the 1940s and early 1950s. Prime Minister Ben
Chifley thought he was witnessing Australia in a Marxist pre-revolutionary stage during the coal strikes in the late 1940s. The CPA was defeated and expelled from the unions – at least officially. People were confident they were done with it. How sound was that confidence? Not very, as it turns out. Marxism went temporarily underground or retreated into academic redoubts, as Roger Scruton puts it, and underwent a transmutation into what is called neo-Marxism.

Among the most influential writers of the neo-Marxist inexhaustible body of work are Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer, Jurgen Habermas, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault. These and others come under the scrutiny of Scruton’s forensic mind in his book *Fools, Frauds, And Firebrands: Thinkers of The New Left*. The influence of the neo-Marxists in the universities of the liberal-democracies since the 1960s is scarcely to be underestimated. When Tony Abbott started at Sydney University in 1976, the Department of General Philosophy was run by a ‘Marxist caucus’. According to Alan Barcan, ‘The most popular philosopher studied in this department was the French neo-Marxist philosopher, Louis Althusser. Later Michel Foucault and others came into favour.’1 Althusser will be the subject of a later talk.

Edmund Burke simply could not have envisaged an all-encompassing theory like Marxism despite his awareness the intellectual’s enthusiasm to apply abstract theory to the practical process of governing. If he thought the philosophical works of Lord Bolingbroke belonged to the ‘fairyland of philosophy’ and condemned those as ‘metaphysical mad’ who refused to take the concrete circumstances of a particular political question into consideration, he would have been paralysed by the unimaginable nightmare of Marxism. In this regard, it is a stupendous irony that Marx’s materialistic theory depends on the unsustainable foundation of a metaphysical theory – that borrowed from Georg Hegel. I will come back to this point. Marxism is just the sort of metaphysical madness Burke had in mind when he uttered that phrase.

If Marxism is Burke’s worst nightmare and if it has infected all institutions of Western state and society (note the powerful presence of Marxists at La Trobe University), then it stands to reason that we Burkeans should know something about it – what it says and
what its weaknesses are. We have to know who our enemy is and how it thinks. In fact, Marxism is diametrically opposed to Burke’s thought on just about every philosophical point. This is the reason I grabbed Scruton’s book when I learned about its publication. It has not disappointed.

Scruton examines the writings of the neo-Marxists who came into their own from the 1960s onwards. To ensure a satisfactory understanding of the main points of his criticism, it will be useful to take a look at classical Marxist theory. One of Scruton’s most telling charges is that the neo-Marxists evade or seek to shield their theories from the objections that were raised against Marx’s theories from the beginning. Ludwig von Mises raised many of those criticisms in a series of lectures in 1952 that were later compiled in a book, *Marxism Unmasked*. The following summary of Marxism is taken for the most part from von Mises book.

There are three main elements in Marxism. The first is a metaphysics that was taken and adapted from Georg Hegel’s philosophy of history. The second is a theory of economics and the third is an ethical theory.

Marx thought that Hegel had discovered an invariant law governing the evolution of nations through history. Hegel called it the dialectic. Hegel had taken the term from Plato’s dialogues in which the dialectic was a progressive form of argument. In logical terms it followed ‘the method of the contrary’. If one offers a definition of what justice is, for example, it is likely that someone will offer an objection or a counter definition. If the speaker considers the objection serious enough, he will modify his definition to accommodate the objection. He then has a new definition. If there is another objection, there will be a further modification to come at a new definition. And so it could go on. The process of the dialectic, then, is thesis, antithesis and then synthesis which leads to a new thesis and so on. Hegel broadened the dialectic to explain the historical development of nations.

A nation does not remain static. It’s always on the move. Its social, political and economic structure will raise oppositions. Those oppositions will inevitably develop into
conflict out of which a new structure emerges that accommodates the best features of each opposition. The new arrangements would be an improvement. It would not be too long, however, before oppositions arise which also develop into new conflicts. Out of the conflict a new structure would emerge. You can see the dialectic in operation: thesis, antithesis and synthesis. In the process of the dialectic is what Hegel called the ‘Spirit’ of the nation. The Spirit guides the nation to its perfection, its Idea or Absolute Idea. The process of the dialectic is clearly metaphysical – or spiritual. The dialectic is a necessary law of historical evolution. It will operate no matter what nations or individuals attempt.

Marx was charmed by this necessary law of historical development but added a correction to where he considered Hegel had fallen down. Instead of a metaphysical or spiritual process, Marx insisted the law was materialistic. It was not the spiritual but the material that was inherent in the necessary law of the evolution of states. That all-important material element was what Marx called the ‘material forces of production’ – the means of production. In other words, Marx’s dialectic was about the nation’s economic development. Here again the materialist dialectic was a necessary law of development that decided on the form the nation would take in every respect – government, law, customs, arts and religion. These were the production relations Marx said the material forces of production – the means of production – determined. We can speak of an economic base that determines a superstructure, a superstructure of government, law, customs, arts and religion. Nations and peoples have no choice in what the superstructure consists. It is decided by the economic base, that is, the means of production – the material forces of production.

Therefore, to summarise, at a given stage in history, according to Marx, nations have a particular economic base – or possess particular material forces of production. That economic base determines a superstructure of laws, government, customs, religion, art and so on. The beliefs of the superstructure are its truth. Truth was relative to the superstructure. Beliefs are subjective. So determined, people could not think otherwise. To go into more detail, the materialist dialectic works in the following way.
A nation’s material forces of production and the production relations determined by them result in a conflict between those who benefit and those who are disadvantaged or exploited. A nation divides itself into classes. The concept of class is of the first importance in Marx’s theory, although he is never explicit about what class is exactly. He says what it is not, but not what it is. Resentment and dissatisfaction arise between the classes to the extent that conflict arises. This is the crucial point. The materialist dialectic is about the clash of class rather than the clash of nations. The course of history is an account of the clash of classes. So we have the thesis in the present economic state of affairs and the antithesis in the resentful exploited class. Conflict is inevitable. It develops and resolves itself into a new economic state of affairs in which the material forces of production are different – more advanced technologically. They determine a different set of production relations. The change in the material forces of production is a crucial element in the resolution of the class conflict. We have the synthesis and the new economic order. The materialist dialectic carries on relentlessly until it reaches a perfect state of affairs in which there are no classes and no conflict.

The concrete examples Marx gives are the ancient King states in which the king oppressed and exploited the slave population. That inevitable conflict resolved itself into the system of feudalism – the lords oppressed and exploited the serfs. The means of production in feudalism is characterised by the hand mill – tools worked by the hand. The conflict unleashed by the feudal system resolved itself into the capitalist system, today’s economic system, in which the few own the means of production – represented in the beginning by the technologically advanced steam mill. Capitalists continue to maintain their position by the continuing technological advances. The capitalist class oppresses and exploits the immeasurably larger class of workers who are dependent on them for their livelihood.

According to Marx, the capitalist class will become ever more powerful eliminating competition and impoverishing the working class – or the proletariat. The oppressed and barely subsisting proletariat will become conscious of their indigent state – become class conscious. They will begin their resistance. The materialist dialectic makes revolution inevitable. But in the case of the capitalist vs. the worker the materialist dialectic will
reach its end point, the state of perfection, in which classes will disappear – freedom and justice for all – and the state will wither away. The materialist dialectic leads to paradise on earth – the state John Lennon so wistfully yearns for in his mega-hit *Imagine*. No heaven above, no hell below and no religion, too. Between the imploding of capitalism and the blissful state of communism there will be the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’. ‘It would prevent remnants of the old capitalist ruling class from trying to return to power and would “reeducate” the workers into a “higher consciousness” free from the residues of the prior bourgeois mentality.’

This summary explains not only Marx’s idea of the dialectic – an invariant law of historical evolution. Leaving aside the metaphysics of the materialist dialectic – it is indeed a metaphysical theory – Marx also gives an account of how economies rise and fall and eventually lead to the capitalist system. Marxists claim that Marx has offered a true economic description of the failings of the capitalist system. Included in this economic description are certain basic notions. There is the Labour Theory of Value which in brief says that economic value is decided by the cost of labour a commodity demands. There is also Marx’s theory of Surplus Value. The employer pays a worker an amount estimated necessary to produce a commodity. But the worker produces a product or commodity that is higher in exchange value than his wages. There is a surplus value which the worker has produced but does receive. It is shaved off as profit for the employer. Marx says this is the fundamental conflict between employer and employee or between the capitalist class and the working class. It is exploitation.

In addition to the injustice of capitalist exploitation there is the degradation of the human person. The degradation is a consequence of the self-alienation the worker has to suffer in the capitalist system. This is Marx’s ethical theory. A worker in the factory production line loses a sense of who he is. He stands there cut off from his fellowman performing partial repetitive work to produce a commodity. It is not even his. In his place in the production line he does not even see the completed product. He is a sort of automaton separated from the person he is. His humanity disappears. He suffers self-alienation. At the same time the capitalist system causes him to become an object and to attach life to the market forces and commodities. Marx speaks of commodity fetishism. Fetishism is
the attribution of life to material objects. I will come back to commodity fetishism in the next talk when I look at Scruton’s examination of Lukacs, Habermas and Althusser.

What is one who has no acquaintance with Marx’s ideas to think of his grand vision? It could sound pretty enticing, couldn’t it? Indeed, the Marxist promise of the perfect society makes useful propaganda. Who would not want a blissful society, paradise on earth, and see the comeuppance the bosses deserve? But does it all bear scrutiny – particularly all that stuff about self-alienation that has unleashed interminable disquisition in the sequestered space of academic offices?

Marx and Engels produced their Communist Manifesto in 1848. Marx produced his masterpiece, the three-volume, Das Kapital, between 1867 and 1894, the third volume released posthumously. By the 1890s there were serious criticisms of Marx’s socialist ideas. Marx’s collectivist socialism presented dangers to liberty and economic prosperity. Richard M. Ebeling in his introduction to Marx Unmasked wrote of von Mises:

Mises observed that most of the earlier critics of socialism had rightly pointed out that a system of comprehensive government planning of economic affairs would create the worst tyranny ever experienced in human history. With all production, employment, and distribution of output completely under the monopoly control of the State, the fate and fortune of every individual would be at the mercy of the political authority.

The vast empirical evidence of more than one hundred years supports von Mises. Von Mises as an economist wrote much about the economic incoherence of the socialist system in detail that I cannot cover here. He asserted that a socialist economy simply would not work. The gist of it, however, is that in a market economy the consumer dictates to the businessman his wants and the businessman works out from the mix of labour costs and scarce resources, taking into account the competition, whether he can satisfy a particular consumer want. The market economy, of course, presumes private property. There is, says von Mises, a ‘rationality’ in all this that is totally absent from the centrally planned economy of Marx’s socialist vision. Von Mises makes the point in saying that the businessman or the entrepreneur in a market economy decides what’s to
be produced on the basis of economic data whereas the state official decides in a centrally planned socialist economy. It is no wonder that Marxist centrally planned governments have failed – often spectacularly.

That Marx’s conception of a capitalist economy is so fundamentally wrong is indicated in his key proposition about the unrelenting impoverishment of the worker under the capitalist system. Marx does not recognise that the consumer/worker is king for the successful capitalist. The capitalist produces what the market wants and, if he has any sense, ensures that his market remains intact, that is, that the worker has the ability or wealth to do his job as a consumer. But Marx also contradicts himself on the capitalist’s treatment of his workers. On the one hand, he claims that the capitalist’s impoverishment of the worker is inevitable, part of the capitalist system. On the other hand he also recognises the ‘iron law of wages’. This was fundamental to his doctrine. The iron law of wages states in brief that the worker’s wage ‘is determined by the amount of food and other necessities required for the preservation and reproduction of life, to support [his] children until they can themselves work in the factories.’

Another fundamental contradiction is that while Marx asserted the doctrine of the necessary impoverishment of the worker, leading to rebellion, he also organized a revolutionary movement. Why would he need to spend so much time organizing revolution when he said that change to the economic base was inevitable? And why condemn the capitalist in such strong language when the capitalist had no choice in exploiting the worker. In his dialectical scenario that was the capitalist’s job. It was a necessary step towards the worker’s paradise. Workers logically should appreciate being exploited. What a tangle Marx got into, von Mises said. He runs through a category of problems or contradictions in Marx’s philosophy and I cannot go into them all here. I strongly refer you to his book. I will rest with a couple more before going on to Scruton’s book.

The mind-body problem in philosophy is a wide complicated area. The task is to account for how one’s mental states are related to one’s physical make-up. There are various explanations but Marx’s explanation is our subject here. Marx’s explanation for the
origin of ideas was material one. As I have already said, the material forces of production were responsible for the ideas that developed into a full-blown superstructure. Looking more closely at this contention, although Marx was never explicit about what exactly those material forces of production were, it seems fairly sure that he meant tools and machines. Tools and machines were the origin of ideas, and thus the origin of society. They were the basis of everything. Manifestations of the human mind are products of the material productive forces. But how could this be? Tools and machines just don’t materialize out of nothing. Surely an idea of what sort of tool one needs precedes the making of the tool. It is equally assumed that a social state exists in which there is a division of labour. Marx further contradicted himself when he dismissed John Locke’s empiricist epistemology – all ideas have their origin in the senses – as the class doctrine of the bourgeoisie. But class as the origin of ideas contradicted the doctrine of the material forces of production being the origin of ideas.

Finally, I want to mention what I consider to be the biggest problem of all, one that destroys Marx’s materialist philosophy at its roots. I have already said that Marx adopted Hegel’s dialectic but rejected its metaphysical or spiritual nature. Indeed, Hegel’s philosophy was idealist. Idealism in brief is the claim that the mind or mental states constitute reality. Now Marx may have stated that his adjusted Hegelian dialectic was materialist, and being materialist had the status of science, but how could a universal objective invariant law governing the material world be material? Materialist metaphysics claims that the world is material, everything is reduced to the material, that there is nothing beyond the material. Where in the material world can one observe that material thing called an invariant law predicting the growth and change of societies? This is the point that Scottish empiricist philosopher David Hume made about the scientific method. Causality is merely the repetition of particular contiguous actions. No, Marx’s law of dialectic materialism is beyond the material, making it just as metaphysical as Hegel’s idealist dialectic. The truth is that Marx could not wriggle out from under the influence of German philosophy in general and Hegelian metaphysics in particular. It is a point that Scuton comments on. I will turn now to the first chapter of Fools, Frauds, Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left.
Just a note before I do. The predecessor to Fools, Frauds, and Firebrands was Scruton’s Thinkers of the New Left published in 1985. As Scruton relates, the publication caused a leftist fury so hot and widespread that it marked the end of his academic career. Leftist academics everywhere wanted a piece of him. Reviewers raised questions about his intellectual competence and his moral character. Some very indignant academics wrote to his publisher, Longmans, wondering why they took on an author that tarnished their respectable imprint. One bestselling author threatened to take his work elsewhere if Longmans did not give Scruton the boot. And so it happened. The remaining stock of Thinkers of the New Left ended up in Scruton’s garden shed. This is a particular dramatic demonstration of the power of the leftist class to ruthlessly crush anyone dissenting from their views. It was action that is repeated time and again in our slowly disintegrating liberal-democratic society. We see it daily.

In his first chapter ‘What is Left?’ Scruton asks why he refers to a group of intellectuals who are far from holding the same views as ‘the left’. He answers first that they refer to themselves as on the left.

Second, they illustrate an enduring outlook on the world, and one that has been a permanent feature of Western civilization at least since the Enlightenment, nourished by the elaborate social and political theories that I shall have occasion to discuss in what follows.

Scruton then describes that outlook:

Leftists believe, with the Jacobins of the French Revolution, that the goods of this world are unjustly distributed, and that the fault lies not in human nature but in usurpations practised by a dominant class. They define themselves in opposition to established power, the champions of a new order that will rectify the ancient grievance of the oppressed.
The essential preoccupations of the new order are liberation and ‘social justice’. He goes on:

The liberation advocated by left-wing movements today does not mean simply freedom from political oppression or the right to go about one’s business undisturbed. It means emancipation from the ‘structures’: from the institutions, customs and conventions that shaped the ‘bourgeois’ order, and which established a shared system of norms and values at the heart of Western society...

Much of their literature is devoted to deconstructing such institutions as the family, the school, the law and the nation state through which the inheritance of Western civilization has been passed down to us. This literature, seen at its most fertile in the writings of [Michel] Foucault, represents as ‘structures of domination’ what others see merely as the instruments of civil order.

Recognising the victims who need to be liberated is a ceaseless task. All manner of victims, right down to the Muslims who need to be liberated from Islamophobia, pass in the leftist parade of oppressed victims. These victims are taken up into the leftist agenda and protected by the purpose-made laws and committees they have generated.

Gradually the old norms of social order have been marginalized, or even penalized as violations of ‘human rights’. Indeed, the cause of ‘liberation’ has seen the proliferation of more laws than were ever invented to suppress it – just think of what is now ordained in the cause of ‘non-discrimination’.

The clear echoes of Marxism, as I have described it, are heard in all this. Scruton’s account of the leftist’s idea of social justice is as just as clear and succinct – and recognizable to anyone who has observed the actions of our dominant political class.

‘Social justice’ is no longer equality before the law, or the equal claim to citizenship. The aim is a comprehensive rearrangement of society so that privileges, hierarchies, and even the unequal distribution of goods are either overcome or challenged.
The radical’s demand for the abolition of private property may no longer be as insistent as in the past with today’s striving for equality, but there is now an uncompromising determination in those promoting social justice. It is the driven belief that ‘inequality in whatever sphere – property, leisure, legal privilege, social rank, educational opportunities, or whatever else we might wish for ourselves and our children – is unjust until proven otherwise.’ The leftists strive to disqualify any flicker of dissent, but not on the grounds of a reasoned response.

It is an argument that allows nothing to stand in its way. No existing custom, institution, law or hierarchy; no tradition, distinction, rule or piety can trump equality, if it cannot provide itself with independent credentials. Everything that does not conform to the egalitarian goal must be pulled down and built again, and the mere fact that some custom or institution has been handed down and accepted is no argument in its favour. In this way ‘social justice’ becomes a barely concealed demand for the ‘clean sweep’ of history that revolutionaries have always attempted.

Not only do we hear echoes of Marxism here, we can also hear Edmund Burke’s railing against the Jacobins’ abstract idea of liberty and equality or against the notion that state and society can be rebuilt on the basis of an abstract theory. And, indeed, Scruton invokes Burke’s arguments at crucial points, as I will explain in my second talk.

The two goals of liberation and social justice, he says, are just as incompatible as they were at the time of the Jacobin rage. But how is one to deal with someone with qualities and character that enable him to outdo and rise above his fellow citizens? It not by prevailing in reasoned argument, says Scruton. It is by reviving old resentments. It’s ‘by declaring war on traditional hierarchies and institutions in the name of the two ideals.’ By doing so, the left succeeds in obscuring the conflict between them: ‘social justice is a goal so overwhelmingly important, so unquestionably superior to the established interests that stand against it, as to purify every action done in its name.’

As I say, we daily recognise the left’s political tactic in shielding their beliefs and political action from close scrutiny and, if things get too hot for them, in labelling dissenters as callous protectors of class difference. Scruton returns to Marx’s dialectic to
show how Marx framed the glorious promise for his disciples. He runs through the progress of the dialectic showing how changes in the economic base inevitably lead to a blissful classless society in which private property is abolished. ‘The state,’ he says quoting Marx, ‘will “wither away”, there will be neither law nor the need for it, and everything will be owned in common. There will be no division of labour and each person will live out the full range of his needs and desires, “hunting in the morning, fishing in the afternoon, tending cattle in the evening and engaging in literary criticism after dinner’, as we are told in *The German Ideology*.”

What an irresistible picture of paradise on earth! Who could possibly object to this vision – one so fervently wished for by the proletariat? It seems that to be wished for in the Marxist imagination is to be actualised. Scruton’s reply to this patent nonsense is devastating.

It’s a joke to claim this outburst of fancy is scientific instead of utopian, he says. Where is the social structure to enable all these activities? You only have to look at our present society to see what social, legal and administrative structures are presupposed by any one of them. Who is going to organize the administrative framework if bourgeois society has been abolished? But such questions are ‘beside the point’ or ‘are too trivial to be noticed.’

Or rather, they are too serious to be considered, and therefore go unnoticed. For it requires but the slightest critical address, to recognize that Marx’s ‘full communism’ embodies a contradiction: it is a state in which all the benefits of legal order are still present, even though there is no law; in which all the products of social cooperation are still in existence, even though nobody enjoys the property rights which hitherto have provided the sole motive for producing them.

The contradictory nature of the socialist utopias is one explanation of the violence involved in the attempt to impose them: it takes infinite force to make people do what is impossible.

Let us now return to the words of the Marxist coordinator of the Safe Schools Coalition campaign in the light of Scruton’s judgement. The destruction of the capitalist order
means the destruction of all the manners and mores of present day society – the oppressive capitalist superstructure. The dazzling phoenix that ascends out of the ashes of bourgeois society is a world, according to Ward, in which ‘human sexuality, gender and how we relate to our bodies can blossom in extraordinarily new and amazing ways that we can only try to imagine today…”

Indeed, we don’t have to exert how imaginations. We need only follow the logic of Ward’s Marxist exuberance. If there are no barriers whatever to the expression of one’s sexuality, then there are no barriers between children and adults or between human and animals. The logic says that the education and instilling of Ward’s Marxist vision amounts to the grooming of children for contact with adults. But, of course, to draw such a conclusion would be to reflect the detestable subjective mentality of the bourgeois class. The blossoming ‘in extraordinarily new and amazing ways’ must open the doors of the prisons to those unjustly convicted by bourgeois society and about whom the hypocrites of the dominant leftist class have raged near on thirty years.

I will leave my commentary here and take it up in the next presentation when I discuss Scruton’s examination of the work of some of the neo-Marxists. I will end by emphasizing how diametrically opposed Edmund Burke’s thought is to Marxism, whether in its old or new form.

The human person, said Burke, is by nature a being of reason and of a moral consciousness. Man’s reason operates in a stable ordered intelligible world in which he recognises the supreme authority of an objective moral law – the natural moral law. These two qualities – reason and moral discernment – demonstrate that civil society is the natural condition of man for it is only in civil society that he can fully deploy and perfect his reason and moral discernment. But the people of civil society do not draw rules directly from the natural moral law. According to Francis Canavan SJ, the moral law is mediated to society through its customs, traditions and institutions, those elements that build civil society. And here we have a key feature of Burke’s political and moral vision. Civil society is natural, but only its framework is given to people. A people realise their particular society through history. A given civil society is an artefact of its people. ‘Art is man’s nature’, Burke said. Connected with the functioning of an enduring civil society is Burke’s doctrine of ‘prescription’. Prescription holds civil society together. ‘The doctrine
of prescription,’ he said, ‘is a part of the law of nature (Reflections).’ I will end with Burke’s clearest statement of prescription and its accompanying ‘presumption’ which came in a speech to the Commons on 7 May 1782:

Prescription is the most solid of all titles, not only to property, but, which is to secure that property, to Government. They harmonize with each other, and give mutual aid to one another. It is accompanied with another ground of authority in the constitution of the human mind, presumption. It is a presumption in favour of any settled scheme of government against any untried project, that a nation has long existed and flourished under it. It is a better presumption even of the choice of a nation, far better than any sudden and temporary arrangement by actual election. Because a nation is not an idea only of local extent, and individual momentary aggregation, but it is an idea of continuity, which extends in time as well as in numbers, and in space. And this is a choice not of one day, or one set of people, not a tumultuary and giddy choice; it is a deliberate election of ages and of generations; it is a Constitution made by what is ten thousand times better than choice, it is made by the peculiar circumstances, occasions, tempers, dispositions, and moral, civil, and social habitudes of the people, which disclose themselves only in a long space of time. It is a vestment, which accommodates itself to the body. Nor is prescription of government formed upon blind unmeaning prejudices—for man is a most unwise, and a most wise, being. The individual is foolish. The multitude, for the moment, is foolish, when they act without deliberation; but the species is wise, and when time is given to it, as a species it almost always acts right.

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1 Alan Barcan, From New Left to Factional Left: Fifty Years of Student Activism at Sydney University, Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2011, pp. 129/130