

Simon Choat

Marx Through Post-Structuralism: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze.

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Choat describes his book as one that reads ‘Marx *through* post-structuralism’ (1; emphasis Choat’s). By this he means that it is neither a critique of Marx from the standpoint of post-structuralism nor the reverse; still less is it an attempt at a synthesis of the two. Any of those projects would presuppose that Marx’s thought and post-structural theory are heterogeneous to one another. Choat’s overarching thesis is a rejection of that presupposition. The immediate difficulty that thus confronts him is the ambiguity of the proper name ‘Marx’. Choat is aware of that difficulty, and his practice is responsive to it. For him there are two Marx’s: one an ‘idealist’; the other a ‘materialist’. The idealist-materialist contrast is taken from Althusser (the subject of Choat’s first chapter): ‘For Althusser, idealism is a philosophy of Origins and Ends, relying at once on an ontology—defined here as a conception of the essential nature of the world—and a teleology referring all events to a pre-established destiny’ (2). In the present context ‘idealism’ is thus another word for orthodox Marxism which embraces an ontology (the notorious base-superstructure model of society) and a teleology (the even more notorious stage theory of history) (22). ‘Materialism’ is rather less easily defined, but at a minimum involves a commitment to doing justice to the particularity and contingency of events, social forms, and so on. On Choat’s reading, the post-structuralists are united in their rejection of idealism and in their desire for a ‘genuinely materialist philosophy’ (2). Their work is valuable in large part because it allows us to strip the idealist dross from Marx’s texts, leaving us with a compelling materialism (3). Choat applies his interpretive framework to Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze. The subjects are treated in inverse order of Choat’s evaluation of their work, with Lyotard being the thinker he admires least. That evaluation, in turn, is determined by the degree to which the work of each allows for a sympathetic engagement with Marx.

Lyotard is unique among the four thinkers Choat considers in having made the journey from ‘committed Marxist’ (38) to one who is, if not anti-Marxist, at least resolutely non-Marxist (65). Choat provides a helpful overview of Lyotard’s writings, from the earliest to the latest. He identifies the crux of Lyotard’s interpretation of Marx as follows: ‘Marx pines for the immediacy, transparency, and naturality of pre-capitalist societies’ (48; see also 64). In those societies use-value (of commodities and labor-power) existed independently of exchange-value. The telos of history is the restoration of that state of affairs. Lyotard rejects both the form and content of Marx’s analysis so understood. In terms of form he denies that there is any standpoint external to capitalism that can serve as a basis for opposition to it (48). In terms of content he rejects the

Marxian categories of labor, need, and so on, opting instead for a Freudian/Nietzschean emphasis on desire (43). Choat forcefully criticizes Lyotard's reading of Marx, pointing out that there is little textual basis for imputing to him a nostalgia for pre-capitalist social formations or a simplistic belief that use-value is good, exchange-value bad (50-5). He also faults Lyotard's own theory for its lack of 'concrete historical and contemporary detail' (50). In light of those criticisms it is surprising to find Choat judging Lyotard's analyses of 'capitalism and Marx...[to be] exciting and innovative' (50). Surely that verdict is belied by Lyotard's own words and Choat's commentary on them.

The chapter on Derrida is the least successful in the book. The reason is not hard to see. Choat attempts to present each of the thinkers he discusses as struggling against an idealist Marx. Yet, as Choat acknowledges, Marx is simply not a significant presence in Derrida's thought prior to 1993's *Specters of Marx* (66). Choat attempts to surmount this difficulty by scouring Derrida's earlier writings for indications of a connection between deconstruction and Marx (67-73). Unfortunately, that effort yields only vague pronouncements concerning Marx's importance and promises of some future engagement with him. As for *Specters* itself, Choat places it in the materialist tradition because it sees in Marx a 'messianic eschatology' rather than a teleology (67, 71). Unfortunately, Choat relies more on quotation than exegesis to explain that concept, an interpretive strategy which leaves its meaning in obscurity. Thus, Choat ultimately fails to make the case for placing Derrida amongst the ranks of materialist thinkers. Indeed, Choat seems to acknowledge as much when he later concedes that 'Derrida loudly proclaimed his affiliation with Marx but often seemed to do little with him' (103).

Foucault's dialogue with Marx is a peculiar one. Choat aptly characterizes Foucault's side of it as 'studied silence punctuated by critical assaults' (94). Yet, as Choat points out, there is an obvious affinity between the two thinkers (94). Much of his discussion is devoted to unpacking that claim. For example, he rightly notes that 'Foucault's genealogies...offer a form of history very like Marx's own historical analyses' (104). He also argues persuasively that the converse is true: Marx's historical analyses—for example, the account of the origin of capitalism found in Volume I of *Capital*, and the historical methodology elaborated in the Preface to the *Grundrisse* (111)—fit very neatly with the project of historical inquiry delineated in Foucault's 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' with its stress on contingency and conflict. Interestingly then, the primary value of Foucault's work lies in the similarities it has with Marx's. Discerning those similarities reveals the materialist Marx obscured by more orthodox readings (113, 135).

Deleuze occupies a privileged place in Choat's analysis. Like Lyotard, Derrida, and Foucault, Deleuze rejects idealism. Yet, unlike them he 'unashamedly declares himself a Marxist' (129). Thus, Deleuze is unique in explicitly and consistently focusing his analysis on capitalism. He is at pains however, to stress the contingency of its origins and perpetuation (133; 167). Thus, Deleuze combines the strengths of Foucault's analysis (an

emphasis on contingency and conflict) while avoiding the weaknesses inherent in a shift away from a focus on capitalism and toward a more murky engagement with some less well-defined target (power, bodies, life, and so on).

A work such as *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* must be assessed at two levels. The first is as an interpretation of Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault and Lyotard. Here the book succeeds admirably. Choat is a sure-handed and judicious guide through very difficult terrain. He writes clearly and in a measured tone in an area where both qualities are all too rare. The second level concerns the merits of the views presented. *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* is less successful on that score. A remark Choat makes at the end of his chapter on Deleuze is telling, and serves to highlight a general weakness of the thinkers he discusses: ‘Despite its historical perspective, its demand to begin from concrete situations, and its search for revolutionary opportunities in specific moments, Deleuze’s philosophy risks falling back on ontological abstractions with concrete and specific differences dissipating’ (154). In short, the post-structuralists fail to deliver the sort of concrete analysis that their rejection of idealism demands. (Foucault certainly *attempts* to meet this demand. Yet he can scarcely be credited with developing the sort of fine-grained analytic tools that one finds in *Capital*.) That failure justifies a pronounced skepticism concerning Choat’s view that reading Marx through post-structuralism is a helpful way to arrive at an improved (materialist) Marx.

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