

## CRISIS THEORY

Erik Olin Wright, *Class Crisis and the State*, London: NLB, 1978.

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, the bourgeoisie is portrayed as a sorcerer whose magic has escaped his control. The development of the productive forces, conjured up by the sorcerer for his benefit, have a power of their own; taking control of the historical process, these productive forces (embodied in the proletariat) sweep away the sorcerer with their greater powers. The analogy is ironic: today the bourgeoisie has not been swept away, while Marxism threatens to succumb to a magical self-understanding.

Magical Marxism is a symptom of thought in decline; the revival of "true marxism" is a talisman that keeps up revolutionary hope, but excludes critical re-examination. Wright never tires of incantation; mere repetition, apparently, convinces him of its power. "Marxism ... is not a theory of class structure; it is above all a theory of class struggle" (98). In addition to mere chanting, however, *legerdemain* is intended; magic is concealed as a "marxist science". Wright seeks a science that can causally explain and predict human action nomologically. The illusion of science itself conceals scientism, the naive assumption that a natural science of human action is possible. Despite the disclaimer of "marxist science" this is a variant of positivist thought; as in positivism, the moment of critical reflection is conjured away.

Wright's science takes as its point of departure the notion of structural causality (suggested by Althusser in *Reading Capital*), interpreted in the framework of a cybernetic systems analysis. Science becomes hocus-pocus as dialectical reflection is reduced to a bewildering array of flow charts, diagrams and operational definitions. To wit: "A mediation process can be viewed as a 'contextual variable': processes of mediation determine the terrain on which other modes of determination operate" (23). Even as "scientific method", this procedure has the function of a totem: the objection that social systems analysis cannot be conceived in causal-explanatory fashion (*cf.* Habermas' debate with Luhmann) has been tabooed.

Undaunted by his clumsy sleight of hand, Wright casts another spell. Bewitched by the aura of identitarian thought, the object of the theory disappears within its theoretical concept. Behind the model of structural causality lies a Lukácsian totality. Wright designates three structures (economic systems, class struggle and the state) which form a logical system, a "structured totality". The totality exerts priority over history; it represents "real processes", a substratum, in relation to which historical phenomena are appearances. Historical phenomena "constitute 'effects' of structural relations" (14). Historical investigation merely describes; only the totality explains.

Reliance upon the explicit metaphysics of system and history allows Wright to posit an unchangeable set of relations which underlie history: the class struggle. Class struggle is no mere historical accident; given in the structure of the real it has objective status. As in Lukács, each class has objective interests (the bourgeois capitalism, the proletariat socialism). These are not actually existing interests, but imputed ones, interests classes objectively should have.

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Here concept and object are magically united, for history can never change the possibility of the class struggle: the world takes the form of explanation this struggle dictates.

Wright's notion of crises is therefore curious. If they are a result of invariable laws, independent of subjects, crises possess a causal necessity. They become automatic. Crises become a kind of system restructuring whose occurrence or absence can be wholly explained within this objectified framework. Yet crises are also dramas in the lives of individuals; they possess a different sort of necessity which takes its character from the relation of freedom and constraint. Individuals' actions may be determined by forces which operate "behind their backs" (as a result of domination or of the constraints of nature) but they may also act freely. In either case, it is the subject who must choose to rebel or conform, albeit under conditions of imperfect knowledge, internal and external constraints. Wright's identitarian logic reduces the complex relations between knowledge and action, and the fear, guilt anxiety and doubt that accompany it, to the happy consciousness of the uninvolved spectator: revolution will occur when the proletariat "scientifically" know their fundamental (real) interests.

The best moments in this book are those in which Wright abandons the magical chants of orthodoxy. The chapter on the "Historical Transformation of Capitalist Crisis Tendencies" argues that none of the traditional Marxist theories of economic crisis (*e.g.* rising organic composition of capital, underconsumption, profit squeeze) constitutes a total explanation of possible crisis tendencies in contemporary capitalism. Rather, each must be viewed as a dominant crisis mechanism during a particular historical phase. Monopoly capitalism has employed a variety of strategies for coping with traditional crises. As Wright notes, the possibility of the rising organic composition of capital is contained through its slower rate of growth under monopoly conditions, but more importantly, through the development of a labour-intensive service sector. In different ways, Keynesian policies of intervention in the economy also prevent crises through supporting accumulation, encouraging consumption and co-opting working class demands through welfare measures. However, according to Wright, the Keynesian trade-off between unemployment and inflation is no longer sufficiently effective, and demands a restructuring of crisis controls. Wright predicts this restructuring will be in the direction of a further state rationalization of the economy. This will have two important consequences. First, the economic sphere will become thoroughly repoliticized; and more crucially, a deep-seated antagonism will emerge in state-directed monopoly capitalism. The reproduction of commodity production will only be possible through de-commodified state activity (178).

Here Wright comes close to the positions stated by critical theorists such as Habermas and Offe, but he quickly grasps the amulet of orthodoxy. The repoliticization of the economic sphere is said to produce new opportunities for

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class struggle, and is viewed within a problematic which sees all social relations as part of the reproduction of the relations of production. A more thoroughgoing analysis would have to ask whether advanced capitalism has in fact changed the relation of the economic sphere to social life and has thus called into question the project of class analysis. Faced with these questions, Wright begs a hasty retreat into the safe world of magic spells. The chapter on the state, for example, is infuriating and ludicrous; Weber and Lenin are considered as complementary theorists of the state (Weber is concerned with formal rationality and Lenin with substantive rationality!). Ultimately, this book is the work of a sorcerer's apprentice, mainly for those already spellbound by the masters.

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Alan Wolfe, *The Limits of Legitimacy: Political Contradictions of Contemporary Capitalism*, New York: The Free Press, 1977.

Alan Wolfe explores the dimensions of the problematic which haunts late capitalist society: how can the tension, if not the absolute contradiction, between the needs of democracy and the demands of liberalism be resolved? According to Wolfe, the conflict between democracy and liberalism has not only come to be internalised in the principal state functions of legitimation and accumulation, but has also been the driving force behind the creation of six different epochs in the history of the capitalist state.

During each of these epochs, the state has assumed a specific form in an attempt to resolve the central tension or contradiction, thereby preserving capitalist hegemony. Yet, in turn, each of these historic forms has failed: the pressure from below for democracy and majoritarian rights has thus far proved (like the state itself) to be too resilient to wither away or be neatly contained.

Wolfe argues that the history of the state in capitalism has moved successively through the Accumulative, Harmonious, Expansionist, Franchise, Dual and Transnational phases. The appropriateness of each of these categories to the historical period to which Wolfe refers is sometimes less than convincing. As well, the argument is overly detailed in places, even if insightful. While anecdotes are often effectively used to drive home a point, Wolfe occasionally (*e.g.*, when he compares the failure of the Franchise state to successfully appease the poor to the predicament of an American hamburger outlet without customers) overdoes it.