

CUTTING PLATO DOWN TO SIZE?

Eugene Kamenka

Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood, *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Social Context*, Blackwell's Classical Studies, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978, pp. x + 275.

The relationship between Marxism and philosophy has never been a happy one. Neither has it been notably fruitful. There have been first-rate Marxist economists (including Marx himself), economic historians, historians and political journalists. There have been good social and political theorists inspired by Marx: Tönnies, Weber and Schumpeter are outstanding examples. But there is no first-rate Marxist philosopher; indeed there is hardly even a significant one. Marx's "science of society" — theoretically and historically insightful but incomplete and inconsistent — was gradually elaborated by inferior thinkers (Engels, Plekhanov, Lenin and Deborin) into a universal theory of being and becoming, of society and nature, culminating in the "official" dialectical and historical materialism elevated into a state philosophy by Stalin. The result was a vulgarisation of both Marxism and philosophy — as well as of social theory — which pretended to solve problems by re-stating them, and which relied on straw men, on misleading selection and on falsification of texts. It killed the philosophical enterprise by mechanically awarding marks for being on the right side, by always subordinating arguments to conclusions, philosophical thought to partisanship. It could silence opposition only through repression and ubiquitous censorship; it could not successfully impress, and has not successfully impressed, in a climate of free discussion and uncensored access to knowledge.

Since 1948, there has been a slow, fitful and still shockingly restricted development of Soviet and Soviet-bloc philosophy toward some kind of intellectual respectability. Furthered, of course, by de-Stalinisation, it began in the last years of Stalin with his dawning recognition of new technical, professional requirements in connection with physics and the making of science into a productive (and military) force. It involved ultimately the *rejection* of Zhdanovism, of the belief that philosophers (and people) were to be judged in terms of their class origin or simply reduced to being friends or enemies of the working class, of "democracy" and "progress." It got its first fillip from

CUTTING PLATO DOWN TO SIZE

Stalin's "discovery" (or proclamation) of the relative independence of ideology, coupled with a new insistence, in the last years of his rule, that language and then logic were not class-based, but served and reflected objective laws and interests of a whole society. De-Stalinisation and gradual professionalisation of academic work made possible, and indeed, required, the recognition that a philosopher's work might pull in different directions, and not be mechanically classifiable as *either* materialist *or* idealist, conservative or progressive, and that classes and interests might themselves be complex. If Soviet intellectual life in these areas is still crude, the reason lies in the political requirements and fears of those who rule, rather than govern, the Soviet Union.

There is a widespread belief that the revival of Western Marxism associated with the rise of the New Left, and of polycentric and Euro-Communism, has freed Marxism of the rigidities, stupidities and anti-intellectualism of Soviet Marxism and, perhaps, of revolutionary Communism generally. Certainly, there has been in the West a more critical working over of Marx's own thought and of the systems and general propositions erected in his name. But the results, in philosophy and political theory, have not been impressive, in spite of the unstable and short-lived enthusiasms for Korsch and Lukács, Gramsci and Marcuse, Garaudy and Althusser, Colletti and Timpanaro. At most, these thinkers are admirable only in contrast with official Soviet philosophy or with the narrow and limited professionalism, the lack of general knowledge, general culture and general ideas, of many Anglo-Saxon intellectuals. Their work is fundamentally eclectic, the work of civilised men struggling in and only sometimes out of straight jackets. All too frequently they revert to crude Marxism when faced by crucial, disturbing implications of their departure from "orthodoxy" and of their recognition of complexity. Such reversions are introduced, by long-standing Marxist tradition, with the phrase "but in the last analysis" and usually mark the triumph of philosophical dogma and political longing over knowledge and common sense.

Marx himself, in his scientific attitudes, interests and intellectual performance, was a far greater thinker. Essentially he was one of the great Victorians, philosophically trained and with a Hegelian eye for logical connections, distinctions and contradictions. He had no doubt that the three "intensive" philosophers were Aristotle, Spinoza and Hegel; he was interested neither in their class origins nor in demonstrating their class bias. When he reduced Hegel's philosophy to its "material" base he did so in a spirit quite different from Zhdanov's or Stalin's or that of the book under review: he traced it to the general social situation in Germany, to the impotence of the German bourgeoisie coupled with its desire to ape the French model; he saw its belief in the Spirit as a compensatory fantasy, not as a bourgeois tactic. He never thought that Hegel's political philosophy was the most interesting or fruitful

EUGENE KAMENKA

part of that philosopher's work, or that Hegel's logic, his perception of philosophical problems, his advance beyond Spinoza and Kant, were to be understood in terms of his political convictions. Nor did he ever treat political philosophy, *e.g.*, Hobbes or even Locke, as simply reflecting narrow class interest. As we all know, Marx read (and praised) Shakespeare and Homer in preference to Balzac, and Balzac in preference to Zola: the consciously "partisan" he usually found shallow. Marx, in brief, had a mind and he recognised the possession of a mind in others. He thought Weitling an idiot, though Weitling "cared" about "the people" much more than Marx did. There was nothing Marx hated more than unhistorical sentimentality or abstract elevation of "the people" as such. Mao may have said that history was made by the people, Marx did not. History for him was made by those who grasped and developed new productive forces, who attained consciousness of themselves as a class with a historic role, who were fertilised by the lightning of thought. The crude theory of ideologies sketched in the *German Ideology* and the *Communist Manifesto*, enthusiastically seized on by second-rate Marxists and unprincipled political propagandists, does no justice to Marx's much more complex and intelligent view of history. Marx would not have talked of Socrates defending, or betraying, his class, and discussion of Socrates' social origins would have seemed to him politically and philosophically a monstrous and dangerous irrelevancy, appropriate only when dealing with third-rate minds. No doubt Marx himself was in a sensitive position on this score, but that was not his only or his main motivation. He knew a philosopher when he read one.

The 1960's, as we have mentioned, saw a striking revival, or intensification, of serious Marx scholarship, comparatively critical Marxist discussion, and pseudo-Marxist political activism, all of them penetrating into Western universities. With Marx scholarship now having largely exhausted its materials, and activism on the wane, there has been growing interest among Marxists and pseudo-Marxists in tackling in a Marxist way disciplines that Marxists have long neglected or failed to catch up with: anthropology, classics, law, academic political theory, *etc.* The merit of much of this work in English-speaking lands lies in the fact that its authors are professionally trained in their disciplines, aware of their complexity and of recent discoveries and developments, and conscious of the datedness of many traditional Marxist beliefs and pronouncements. (Ellen Meiksins Wood, for instance, knows far too much about Athens to believe that it is well or even correctly described as a "slave-owning society" — slaves in Athens, she argues, freed citizens *for* rather than *from* productive labour, often worked side by side with free labourers or their masters and could and did fill managerial positions; the fundamental conflict and economic division in Athens was not between slaves and free men.) The defect of much of this work, on the other hand, lies in the surprisingly inadequate grasp of Marxism and earlier Marxist work displayed by these newer academics. They are

CUTTING PLATO DOWN TO SIZE

prone to reinterpret Marxism, unconsciously and inconsistently, in terms of current anti-intellectual subjectivism; to embrace unhistorical partisanship as "equality" and "love of the people"; and to combine this with crude Marxist beliefs that sensitive and intelligent thinkers in the Marxist-Leninist world have long (privately) abandoned as intellectually naive, manifestly morally and politically dangerous. Much of this new generation — which has no memory of Zhdanov and no real feeling for economic scarcity — is more at home with the postures of subjective class hostility and class identification than with deeper Marxian analysis of economics or history. Unconsciously, they revert to what Eastern Marxists are seeking to leave behind. They think in terms of "confrontations" and not of "crises" (with the concern which that term betrays for a wider whole); they focus on aggregates of individuals and not on great historic forces and traditions, or on class ideologies rather than technology and economic-political structures.

Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory illustrates rather well the typical merits and shortcomings of this new Anglo-Saxon academic Marxism venturing into "traditional academic" preserves. The product of collaboration between Ellen Meiksins Wood and Neal Wood of York University, Toronto, it is clearly and professionally written; it shows a certain respect for scholarship, acquaintance with classical studies (if not really with philosophy) and a reasonable prudence in making general assertions — contrasting most favourably, in this respect, with the sort of things that younger "academic" Marxists are writing about law, theory of the State or "bourgeois economics." It covers, in general terms, a good deal of ground, but always as part of "exposing" what it takes to be aristocratic or pro-aristocratic bias and anti-democratic myths, promulgated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle themselves and by those who, following Hegel, admire "their" pseudo-polis and "their" transcendental idealism. While the book's main theme is surprisingly simple and in some ways simple-minded, and its sub-themes never complex or subtle, it is a book that does proceed by way of rational argument rather than strident assertion, even if some of those arguments are expressed in language that is heavily loaded, and even if the arguments themselves are slanted and logically suspect. What the book fails to reveal is any sense of intellectual independence, difficulty or puzzlement, any *problems*, or any concrete appreciation whatever of what makes Socrates, Plato and Aristotle great. Socrates, we are told in revealing subheadings to the main chapters, is "the Saint of Counter-Revolution," Plato the "Architect of the Anti-Polis" and Aristotle the "Tactician of Conservatism." Even if all this were true it would be monumentally uninteresting for grappling with the significant questions in political theory and for any appreciation of what is so remarkably penetrating, thought-provoking, important and alive, so "classical" in the best sense of the word, about the work of these thinkers. For in each case, we treasure them not

for their conclusions but for their arguments, for their capacity to state issues and to see what they involve, to have insights, see important distinctions and lay bare the *logic* of argument. It is appreciation of this that the Woods simply lack, or omit from their book. They concede the greatness, at least verbally, but they are not interested in it. The "Socratics," as they call them, are on the wrong side; they give aid and comfort to the enemy, they elevate values and life-styles not open to those who labour, and they are therefore necessarily anti-democratic. The Woods' phraseology and yardstick for all the serious points they make are those of the (Zhdanovist) class war. "Deep-rooted hatred of democracy," opposing the "shared values" of Athenian democracy — those are the crimes of the Socratics. "The trial and execution of Socrates and the indictment against Aristotle cannot be excused," the Woods conclude in a jointly-written chapter (p. 261), "but they can be understood." To make us "understand" that trial, and the aid and comfort that the Socratics have given to reactionaries of all subsequent ages, is the main point of the book. The scholarship, the interest in ancient political theory is subordinate, for political theory is seen, fundamentally, as ideology, as a weapon in the class war. *Classical Ideology and Ancient Political Theory* will not help make the proletariat heir to all previous civilisation; on the contrary, it will encourage that "crude communism" which Marx denounced for seeking to cut away distinctions of culture and talent, *etc.*, for seeking to abolish all that which it could not make the object of universal appropriation.

The main point and theme of *Class Ideology and Ancient Political Theory*, then, is that the classics which help comprise the very foundation of political theory must be viewed as "basically" ideological; they must be rigorously related to and understood through their social context. The political ideas and philosophical thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle defended and justified the values and way of life of a declining and decaying landed aristocracy in opposition to the "true" heritage that Athens has left us — the democratic polis of craftsmen, traders and labourers. Of course, the Woods concede, the Socratics recognised and condemned aristocratic degeneration, but they hoped to re-vitalise the outlook and conduct of the nobility and to create a polis that would stem the levelling tide of democracy, mob tyranny and vulgarity. The theme, of course, is pursued systematically and in detail. Neal Wood, in an opening chapter, moves from the true general proposition that theorising is not neutral, disinterested or divorced from its social context to the conclusion that it is to be understood through that social context and that political theory is "essentially ideological" (p. 6) — a conclusion that does not follow and is not true. Ellen Wood moves on to discuss the nature of the polis, treating the aristocratic polis as an association against a subjected producing class and making some sensible remarks about class and status in Greek society. The three central chapters of the book deal in sequence with Socrates (Neal Wood),

CUTTING PLATO DOWN TO SIZE

Plato (Ellen Wood) and Aristotle (Neal Wood), devoting some space to their life, outlook and associations and then discussing in some detail their fundamental philosophical and political principles — always as reflections of the outlook and demands of the aristocracy. A jointly-written conclusion sums up the Woods' view that Socratic philosophy opposes "the shared values of the Athenian community" (p. 260) and therefore does not provide a standard for judging Athenian practice. The so-called mob was neither idle nor corrupt; the real polis has left us a great democratic legacy.

Soviet students used to emerge from university philosophy lectures, and many still do, with the belief that Socrates was just a teacher of rich men's sons, that Plato wanted society ruled by an elite of "guardians" and was therefore not to be taken seriously, and that Aristotle was a typical philosopher of slave-owning society, who believed that slaves actually had different blood temperature from that of free men. The Woods are, of course, much more detailed in their presentation of the many perfectly obvious connections between aristocratic ideology and the thought of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. But like the Soviet discussion, their treatment seems to me heavily dependent on selective data — and on the use of straw men who allegedly believe the Socratics to be totally disinterested witnesses and theorists. Furthermore, the Woods claim an originality of perspective which seems to me simply false: the general points they make are not denied by any competent student of the classics or political philosophy — they are taken for granted, but treated as subordinate in the serious philosophical appreciation of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. The Woods themselves, as the conclusion ultimately reveals, vacillate between using their class interpretation as a way of discrediting the philosophical importance of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and as a way of discrediting their importance as historical witnesses to Athenian reality. The Woods' own portrayal of that reality is certainly as partisan as any of the Socratics', though it provides a useful counter-picture. But their claim to be making an important contribution to the study of great texts in political theory is false. In so far as the book attempts to do that, it comes at the problem in the wrong way and shows an inadequate grasp of both Marxist and non-Marxist discussion of serious political philosophy.

The Research School of Social Sciences
The Australian National University
Canberra
Australia
