

THE RADICAL INFATUATION WITH WESTERN MARXISM OR LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI?

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Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism*, Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. X+202

One of the more striking characteristics of the re-orientation of social and political theory during the past fifteen years or so, has been the resurgence of interest in various types of Marxist theory.¹ Old theorists were rehabilitated—among them Lukács and Gramsci—and new thinkers were embraced—notably, Althusser and Habermas. The old faith took on new trappings. This second coming of Marxism bore little resemblance to the old-fashioned version. The very foundations of classical Marxism—for example, the stress on the role of the economy and technology on the organization of social life—were cast aside with a corresponding exaltation of the role of the autonomous human subject. Innocent bystanders could be forgiven for wondering whether the uniqueness and perhaps even the coherence of Marxism had not been compromised altogether. The latest work of Russell Jacoby, while not intended as an encyclopaedic survey of all the theorists and issues within the “Western Marxist” tradition, attempts a partial stocktaking and affords an opportunity for a tentative assessment of the approach.² Jacoby writes as both scholar and passionate partisan. Not all, however, will share his continued enthusiasm.

The Dialectic of Defeat is, at one level, a work of intellectual history. As such, it is a quite interesting and significant effort. At another level, it attempts a good deal more, though much less convincingly. As a critique of scientific or, in his term, “conformist” Marxism, as a venture in linking philosophical beliefs and their political implications, and as an attempt to decipher the roots of working class reformism in the West, the analysis is often stimulating but rarely convincing.

Jacoby contrasts the widespread concern of most Western Marxist theorists with the problem of democratic political strategies as opposed to the authoritarian and bureaucratic routes followed by Leninists and Stalinists. He documents how the roots of this difference can be traced, at least in part, to the different interpretations of Hegel that tended to prevail in Russia and Western Europe (p. 7). In Russia, Engels’ scientific interpretation of Hegel was more widely adopted by modernizers who stressed the ideas of laws of development based on Hegel’s *Science of Logic*. In Western Europe, meanwhile, the “historical” Hegel found a more favorable reception. The preferred text here was

ROSAIRE LANGLOIS

The Phenomenology of Mind with its stress on subjectivity and consciousness (p. 38).

Jacoby demonstrates beyond any doubt that the attack on Engels' alleged deformation of Marxist theory began, not with Lukács as is quite commonly assumed, but rather with the Italian and French Hegelians of the 1890's. Already, Gentile, Croce and Rodolfo Mondolfo were alert to some important nuances separating Marx' and Engels' theoretical formulations. In passing Jacoby also attempts, successfully it would seem, to correct some recent misunderstandings with regard to the work of Rosa Luxemburg. Jacoby rejects attempts made to place her within the camp of orthodox Marxism, and reclaims her for "Western Marxism".

The book also contains interesting reflections with regards to the uncritical adoption by the Soviets of Western standards of technological and industrial progress. While Jacoby's *ex post facto* remarks can't help but strike a responsive chord in our own era of ecological crisis and "limits of growth", it is not altogether clear that the Bolsheviks should have been so clairvoyant at the time nor that they had a great deal of choice in the matter.³

One of the major themes of the work involves an attempt to establish a link between philosophical beliefs and political practice (p. 7). Although Jacoby quite explicitly denies any simple connection (p. 60), academic hedging aside, the main thrust of the argument is clear enough: there has been, he maintains, a strong tendency for the orthodox Marxists to resort to authoritarian and bureaucratic political strategies whereas Western Marxism has been permeated by a profoundly "democratic ethos". The psychodynamic core of orthodox Marxism, we are informed, rests on an "asceticism" and a "cold passion for science and authority" (p. 36). It is a thesis which, if seemingly obvious at first glance, is increasingly problematic on closer examination. Asceticism is often an historical concomitant of the industrialization process, including that of the Western nations, and its presence is not, in itself, a cause for surprise or concern. As for the connections between philosophy and politics, Jacoby mentions how Plekhanov, one of the ablest of the orthodox Marxist theorists, broke with Lenin, but neglects to mention that Karl Kautsky, the leading theorist of the Second International, another "scientific" Marxist—known for a time as "the Pope of Marxism"—did likewise.⁴ No mention is made of Bukharin, who provides a somewhat similar case under Stalin.⁵ While differing in political strategy, none of these men—perhaps the three major orthodox theorists—rejected their "scientific" Marxist approach. When one considers, in addition, that two of the most important Western Marxists—Lukács and Gramsci—as Jacoby admits, had changing or ambivalent attitudes towards Leninist political practice, the tenability of the thesis becomes less and less apparent.

Although Jacoby notes in passing that "economic and political conditions in Russia encouraged a Marxism that spoke to different imperatives than in Western Europe" (p. 7), he, regrettably, doesn't pursue this line of analysis at all. The distinguished American sociologist Lewis Coser produced a study, several years ago, which quite profitably examined the development of Marxian thought

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

in the early decades of this century from precisely this angle.⁶ Coser showed, in quite some detail, how differing socio-economic conditions gave rise to the quite varied interpretations of Marxism. Jacoby's own study would have gained immeasurably by confronting the kinds of issues raised by Coser's analysis.

The discussion of "Class Unconsciousness", much the weakest chapter in the book, consists of little more than very brief presentations of various views on the question of why the Western working class has not taken up its revolutionary task. Arghiri Emmanuel's important development of the "labour aristocracy" theme is dismissed in a few words as "economic reductionism". Jacoby's qualified preference—though he refrains from any detailed discussion—would appear to favour "theories of mass culture, advertising, affluence and legitimacy". He would seem to be unaware of the limitations of these theories, all the while clinging—for unspecified reasons—to a faith in the future prospects of the Western working class (p. 126). A fine critical analysis of these very theories favoured by Jacoby has in fact been made by Allan Swingewood in a slim volume, *The Myth of Mass Culture*.⁷ Swingewood not only details the profoundly conservative and unduly pessimistic nature of these approaches, but also discusses the subtle ways in which the "democratisation of culture" has been taking place, thereby providing a somewhat sounder basis on which to base one's hopes for the future.

A central concern of *The Dialectic of Defeat* is the inadequacy of orthodox Marxism with its "naked economic orientation" (a phrase of Bloch's cited approvingly p. 34) which has consequently "obliterated the human individual or subject" (p. 9). While other neo-Marxists have specified in more precise detail the nature of their objection to classical historical materialist theory—usually by stressing the "relations" as against the "forces" of production—the gist is the same.⁸ Orthodox Marxism is, furthermore, in Jacoby's estimation, a distortion of Marx's original project. According to him, Marx's concept of "science" was not the same as what is meant by the term in French or in English (p. 21), and the aim of orthodox Marxists to construct a "real and positive science" (p. 35) is ludicrous, only serving self-discipline and restraining free, unstructured, thought.

In response to these contentions, it should be noted that it is far from being established that Marx's view of science was indeed so very different from our own after all,⁹ and that, furthermore, quite apart from whatever Marx really thought about the matter, studies in anthropology and comparative sociology, principally in the last two decades, suggest, at the very least, that it would be premature to abandon the quest for a "real and positive science of society."¹⁰ Progress in social science was very likely retarded by the tendency in the last century to almost systematically avoid a materialist research strategy: Harris has shown fairly conclusively that such a strategy has never been consistently applied.¹¹ Recently, however, major works by Cambridge anthropologist Jack Goody as well as research inspired by Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism* provide a plausible and quite sophisticated analysis of the ecological origins of the variations in economic, political and kinship systems, as well as the emergence of

ROSAIRE LANGLOIS

literacy and its varied forms, in Africa, Europe and Asia.¹² This data with its emphasis on the primacy of the productive forces, in my view, is compatible with the evolutionary theories advanced by Joseph Needham—the noted biologist and historian—in a number of essays written in the 1930's and 1940's and recently republished. Needham's 1937 Spencer lecture—which has lost none of its relevance—is not only a brilliant essay in "grand theory" but also an original development of some aspects of the theory of scientific socialism.¹³ This body of work may well provide the groundwork for a materialist and evolutionary theory of society which is both empirically grounded and conceptually coherent.¹⁴ In spite of a number of fairly obvious affinities with classical Marxism, it is doubtful that this approach can be strictly classified as a Marxist one, and might more appropriately be considered a variant of "cultural materialism".¹⁵

The nature of this data does not, of course, permit any dogmatic conclusions, but it does raise the strongest doubts concerning the Western Marxist orientation on the issue of the role of the forces of production in social life. The theoretical implications of the data would appear to go directly counter to the central assumptions of Western Marxism. Why? The tendency, on the part of Western Marxists, to deny the primacy of the productive forces, is hardly surprising since any kind of materialist or environmentalist explanation of human action is in contradiction with the somewhat exaggerated views of human autonomy propounded by them.¹⁶ As Wittfogel recently noted:

... man never achieves total freedom . . . Marx stresses that man's freedom is based on dependence on nature and rational behaviour toward it . . . If you believe that because the world is modernized you can ride nature like a horse, you are wrong. With progress this bond becomes only deeper, more complex but it does not disappear.¹⁷

These rather fundamental criticisms aside Jacoby's book is a provocative work containing much information that will be of aid to scholars. And while there does appear to be more problems with the Western Marxist tradition than Jacoby would seem to indicate or perhaps be aware of,¹⁸ it would not do to be entirely dismissive of the tradition. Indeed many individual works will continue to provide a stimulus to reflection. There are grounds, however, as I have tried to indicate, for supposing that—after more than a decade during which radical intellectuals have been under the spell of Western Marxism—like the elusive lady in Keats' poem, the results have not lived up to the high expectations. The fetish for neo-Marxism has, furthermore, led to an altogether puzzling neglect of work which, in my view, was more important, more readily accessible, and even less ponderous, although surely no less radical. It is perhaps time that the infatuation with "la belle dame" ceased, and that we turned our gaze elsewhere.

Toronto

LA BELLE DAME SANS MERCI

Notes

1. Richard Bernstein, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1976, and Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, New York: Basic Books, 1970.
2. For a more comprehensive survey, the reader should turn to Perry Anderson's *Consideration on Western Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1976. For some astute comments on this work, see the review by Heinz Lubasz in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* February 18, 1977. Any attempt to understand Western Marxism really should come to grips with the views advanced by Lewis S. Feuer, for example "Neo-Primitivism: the New Marxism of the Alienated Intellectuals" in his *Marx and the Intellectuals*, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969, and also "University Marxism", *Problems of Communism* July-August 1978.
3. See E.H. Carr "The Legend of Bukharin", *Times Literary Supplement*, Sept. 20, 1974, and Alec Nove, *Was Stalin Really Necessary?* London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964. Nove's outstanding essay gave rise to an almost predictable misunderstanding: that Nove was an apologist for Stalinism!
4. Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1964.
5. Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980.
6. Lewis A. Coser, "Marxist Thought in the First Quarter of the 20th Century", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78 #1, July 1972, pp. 173-201.
7. Alan Swingewood, *The Myth of Mass Culture*, London: Macmillan, 1977.
8. Jürgen Habermas, in *Communication and the Evolution of Society*, London: Heinmann, 1979, rejects the notion of the primacy of the productive forces, p. 146. Even Neo-Marxists like Althusser, who stand in opposition to humanistic Marxism, also stress the dominance of the relations of production: see Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst, *Mode of Production and Social Formation*, London: Macmillan, 1977, p. 52.
9. Lewis S. Feuer, "Marx and Engels as Sociobiologists", *Survey*, Vol. 23 #4, Autumn 1977-78.
10. On the question of social laws, see N. Lobkowitz, "Historical Laws", in Donald McQuarrie, ed., *Marx, Sociology, Social Change, Capitalism*, London: Quartet Books 1978, and Hugh McLachlan, "Popper, Marxism, and the Nature of Social Laws", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 31 #1 March 1980 pp. 66-77.
11. Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory*, New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968, p. 5. Harris' contentious study is nonetheless a magisterial history of anthropological thought.
12. Jack Goody, *Production and Reproduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1976 and *The Domestication of the Savage Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1977. Karl Wittfogel, *Oriental Despotism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957.
13. Joseph Needham, *Moulds of Understanding*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1976, (edited by Gary Werskey). The editor of this edition of Needham's essays falls victim to the prevailing

ROSAIRE LANGLOIS

voluntaristic mood of Western Marxism when he objects to Needham's reliance upon a "deterministic variety of evolutionary Marxism" (p. 23), precisely the approach that, in my view, should at least be reconsidered. Needham's thought is characterized by an uncommon blend of an orthodox Marxism as well as a strong Christian faith.

14. None of this literature has been discussed by neo-Marxist theorists in the last decade, not even by Jürgen Habermas who has attempted to develop the most comprehensive and systematic general theory. Habermas' unwarranted stress on the dominance of the relations of production was noted earlier. For a well-considered and rather devastating critique of other aspects of Habermas' project, see a series of articles by Tronn Overend, notably, "Social Realism and Social Idealism: Two Competing Orientations on the Relation between Theory, Praxis, and Objectivity", *Inquiry*, Vol. 21, 1978, pp. 271-311.
15. Marvin Harris, *Cultural Materialism*, New York: Random House, 1979. See especially Chapter 6, where he presents his criticisms of "dialectical materialism".
16. On the radical incompatibility of the scientific and humanist approaches, see Susan Stedman Jones, "Kantian Philosophy and Sociological Methodology", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 14 #1, February 1980, pp. 99-111.
17. "Conversation with Wittfogel", *Telos*, #43, Spring 1980 to p. 151.
18. Indeed more than it has been possible to even raise here: on some of these other issues, see Lewis Feuer, "The Preconceptions of Critical Theory", *Jewish Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 16 #1, June 1974.

For an original contribution to the somewhat hackneyed debate on the young Marx, and one which is in conflict with the Western Marxist interpretation, see Heinz Lubasz "Poverty: Marx's Initial Problematic", *Political Studies*, Vol. XXIV #1, March 1976 pp. 24-42.