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Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism

Simon Tormey and Jules Townshend

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Attending the launch of this book at the ‘Workshops in Political Theory’ annual conference at the Manchester Metropolitan University, UK, 2006, it struck me that the aim of providing an introduction and assessment of key thinkers in contemporary critical theory in terms of ‘Post-Marxism’ is rather timely. ‘It is here that we find the ambition, as implied in the label Post-Marxism, to leave Marx whilst at the same time recognising Marx’s importance to the task of shaping a left radical discourse “after” his disappearance from the scene’ (p. 1). Post-Marxism has most often been associated with Laclau and Mouffe’s *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) or defined more broadly as a movement that encompasses various critical thinkers. Tormey and Townshend suggest that there are problems with both approaches. Laclau and Mouffe are among many thinkers attempting to extend Marx by engaging with and critically responding to his work, and are described as both *Post-Marxists* and *Post-Marxists* (p. 105), with their earlier work referred to as more ‘neo-’, than ‘post-’Marxist (p. 88). The authors query Post-Marxism’s status as a movement, whether intellectual or political, which they understand as ‘stretching the point’, particularly politically (p. 4). Post-Marxism is located beyond both Eastern and Western Marxism in terms of its historical location, as 1968 demonstrated that ‘progressive politics was “elsewhere” than in Marxist parties or under Marxist leadership’ (p. 3). The traditional revolutionary subject based upon the industrial working class, ‘had transmuted, dissipated, “died” or just refused to budge’ (p. 3). This situation led to a key problematic motivating the left since 1968, which was the question of what or who would be the new agent of social change and critique considered more



generally? ‘Where, then, was the new revolutionary or anti-capitalist subject to come from?’ (p. 3).

While there are many Post-Marxisms, they are generally characterized by the contention that returning to Marx is problematic, given its claim to be *the* emancipatory theory par excellence. Post-Marxist critiques of Marx’s work have focussed upon Marx’s theory of history, his account of the revolutionary subject, his account of ethics, his relation to positivism, vanguardism and intellectuals and the problem of democracy. These problematizations did not simply emerge via circumstances such as events in the Soviet Union, the failure of the working class to actuate its revolutionary consciousness or the emergence of new social movements and identity politics. There were also responses to important intellectual developments such as post-structuralism with a focus on the ‘constitutive character of difference, slippage and the unconscious’, issues of meaning, subjectivity, the symbolic world and relations between language and the representation of subjectivity (p. 6). The book begins with the authors’ introduction, with chapters on thinkers closely associated with 1968 and the Paris Uprisings including Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean-François Lyotard and Deleuze and Guattari. There is a chapter on Mouffe and Laclau and a chapter on Post-Marxist Feminism (weak Post-Marxism includes Michele Barrett and Donna Haraway, while strong Post-Marxism is over-viewed in feminist standpoint theory and materialist feminism). Chapters on Agnes Heller, Habermas and Derrida follow, with an excellent conclusion, *Whither Post-Marxism?* ‘The need to disavow or get “beyond” Marx is at the same time the need to *reread* Marx, to *rethink* Marx and to keep continually in motion the question of Marx’s relevance for us as inhabitants of a world that remains — according to those who defend it as well as those who criticise it — unambiguously and triumphantly capitalist’ (p. 11).

Tormey and Townshend are concerned with two key questions. Whether it is possible to have a common position identified as Post-Marxian? Does Post-Marxism offer an advance on the philosophical, theoretical and political tenets of Marxism? They demonstrate that it is possible to identify a Post-Marxist starting point without assuming that positions identified as Post-Marxist share common visions and ideals (p. 212). It’s the second question they subject to closer scrutiny *after* engaging with the various critical thinkers on the development of Post-Marxist paradigms in terms of core aspects of Marx’s position. Many Post-Marxisms have not ‘abandoned meta-narratives’ and are ‘less an anti-teleological stance than one that displaces one variant of teleology with another — the triumphant march of liberal democracy’ (p. 215). Attempts to improve Marx’s account of radical subjectivity since 1968 with the emergence of New Social Movements do demonstrate that class is one of many bases for radical political action, yet many Post-Marxist thinkers underplay the material causes for radical political action. The authors are not



suggesting all resistance requires a material cause, but do point out that material factors are ‘at least as important as other variables in radicalizing individuals’ (p. 216). Many Post-Marxist thinkers are critical of Marx’s economic determinism for the denial of agency and singular political struggles, as well as criticizing Marx’s positivism. Yet the ‘difference is that the ambition to translate explanatory schemes into political practice is signally absent in many of those who fly the flag for these approaches’ (p. 220).

The Post-Marxist attempt to ‘decentre the intellectual’ is related to the critique of positivism questioning the nature and role of intellectuals theoretically and politically. The paradox for Post-Marxists is that intellectual voices apparently are no more important than anyone else’s and they end up ‘making claims of a traditionally intellectual kind that look strangely like the claims they are criticising’ (p. 222). A major problem is that ‘Marx is judged not only by what he wrote, but also by what Marxists do and did in his name’ (p. 221), as he did not understand the Communist Party apart from the proletariat. In terms of Marx’s problem with democracy, many Post-Marxist theorists are divided about the direction of progressive politics, whether to engage with existing liberal democracy or move beyond it with new forms of democracy that have yet to emerge. ‘As long as there is capitalism, then there will, we think, be a need to reread the greatest theorist *of* capitalism and capitalism’s possible “after”. In this sense we do not see the emergence of Post-Marxism as signifying the “death” or “end” of Marxism. Far from it: as seems obvious we are at some level still in Marx’s “time”’ (p. 11). Overall, this book provides an excellent elaboration of key thinkers from critical theory to Post-Marxism (particularly the outlining of key positions with summaries and assessments) and makes a welcome contribution to continuing debates between and within critical theory, political theory and Post-Marxism.

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The Lacanian Left: Psychoanalysis, Theory, Politics

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In this new book by a prolific scholar on Lacanian theory and radical democracy, the author sets out an ambitious project to provide a contribution