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Marxism @ 2000

Late Marxist Perspectives

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For Jade, Oisín and Yanina

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Preface

The title of this text conjures up an image of Karl Marx sitting at his PC, surfing the Web for the latest news on the apparent collapse of the Asian Tigers' economic model, the social explosion in Indonesia or the general strike in Denmark. I fancy he would be quite at home, and his analysis would be as acute as ever. Now, some years ago, it became commonplace to declare that the 'Century of Marxism' was over. The odd antiquarian might take an interest but his ideas would gather dust in sad secondhand bookshops. Yet now, Jacques Derrida, one-time scourge of marxist metaphysics, can declare boldly and confidently that 'There will be no future without Marx'. So this book explores what a Marx @ 2000 might be like. This will not be an exercise in Marxology, poring over the texts to discover their ultimate meaning. I may well be accused of constructing a 'Marx lite' in keeping with our superficial, consumerist times. I prefer to think of it as a 'Marx live' who is brought to bear on current controversies on how to make sense of our turbulent, even chaotic, globalized postmodern times.

My subtitle refers to 'late marxist' in a passing tribute to Ernest Mandel's *Late Capitalism* (Mandel, 1975), from which we learnt so much. But, as people asked Mandel, late for what? Really, capitalism was just getting into its stride when marxists were declaring it past its sell-by date. Marxism can certainly be seen as too late historically, given that the political systems claiming to build a new society on its principles have collapsed so ignominiously. Maybe, though, it was too early for marxism, because capitalism had not developed sufficiently for its transformative strategy to work. As marxism enters a deep crisis, so capitalism appears to become more 'marxist'. I felt that the term 'post-marxist' was too monochromatic, at once too confidently 'post', and too old-fashionedly marxist. So, for better or worse, I go for 'late marxist' as a floating signifier amenable to different, even contradictory, meanings. It opens up a polyvocal understanding of our fluid times and signals an openness to other oppositional discourses. It would be too late for marxism, I believe, if it persists in seeking to 'reconstruct' itself and to seek comfort in the current problems of capitalism while being blind to its own.

The subtitle also refers to 'perspectives', alluding to the perspectivism of post-structuralism. We all see the world from different subject positions and universalism can lead to oppression. But we can also read

Marx from different historical perspectives. Two hundred years ago the great French Revolution inaugurated an era of emancipation, equality and justice which now seems to have run its course. As Foucault used to say, Marx is nothing if not a nineteenth-century philosopher. Yet we could also adapt the gaze of the *Communist Manifesto*, which appeared 150 years ago, and note how relevant it is to the present era. Indeed, even establishment economists are doing just that now. Come back Marx, all is forgiven.... Or, we could cast a tired, jaundiced look back a decade to 1989 and the collapse of communism. Compensating for not having seen it coming, analysts from left, right and centre made apocalyptic judgements all round, including the 'end of history'. My point is not to adapt any one perspective but to refuse the suffocating 'end of century' blues and melodramatic predictions, in favour of accepting the confused and mixed temporalities in which we live.

Chapter 1 examines the proposition that Marx is a 'dead dog', as irrelevant for this era as Hegel was for his. For Ronald Aronson in a heartfelt coming to terms it is simply the case that: 'Marxism is over' (Aronson, 1995: 9). While a certain marxism is, indeed, suffering from *rigor mortis*, Marx can be seen as alive and kicking if approached in the right spirit. This probably cannot be said for his successors in German social democracy, who have produced today the likes of a Tony Blair. By the 1980s the history of social democracy as a reformist hybrid of marxism seems to have come to an end. The other Marxist-Leninist hybrid seemed more sturdy, but collapsed without a fight in 1989. Were these things inevitable? Were the European roots of marxism debilitating in terms of constructing a global alternative? And, finally, why was late marxism not able to construct a viable vehicle for the future, once the limitations of traditional forms of marxism were detected in the 1970s? This chapter addresses these problems and quandaries in what is, hopefully, an open manner and not in the style of 'I told you so' adopted by self-proclaimed marxists in sects more reminiscent of the religious right than anything else. This chapter is a scene-setter for subsequent engagements of Marx with key issues of his and our day.

The so-called greening of marxism, its acquiring of an ecological conscience, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Chapter 2 examines some of the background to this recent engagement from Marx's own ambiguous treatment of nature, through to the sorry lack of understanding of sustainability by the socialist states, through to current debates. One of the most interesting among these is the emergence of an ecofeminism. In spite of its essentialism, this current has provided an imaginative impetus to the idea of a sustainable good life. What has

brought the notion of sustainable development to the fore in the last decade is, of course, the context of globalization. Ecological problems are, intrinsically, global in their manifestation and resolution today. Certainly there is no easy solution as advised by technocratic environmentalism. Nor are the interests of the industrialized North and the industrializing South easily reconciled. There are many ways in which the socialist red and the environmental green can combine to produce a new variant of sustainable socialist development. This chapter simply seeks to pose some of the challenges involved.

For Lenin, the Soviets plus electrification equalled socialism. Though crude, this equation neatly captures the economistic and productivist bias of much marxism, as described in Chapter 3. Marx's original theory of capitalist development has made an incalculable contribution to what has become known only relatively recently as development studies. Yet the big contradiction is that Marx foresaw socialism growing out of advanced capitalism but, in practice, the socialist revolutions of the twentieth century have occurred under conditions of relative, if not absolute, underdevelopment. Lenin seemed to sweep away the Eurocentrism of Marx's orthodox successors but Leninism, in turn, became more or less an ideology of developmentalism in the Third World. The theory of imperialism, and its Third World variants such as dependency theory, became crucial later marxist contributions to an understanding of development and underdevelopment. Today, with a big question mark over whether the globally dominant capitalism can deliver development, there is a turn towards 'post-development' discourses which seem to hark back to marxist and pre-marxist utopias and visions of the good society.

For Marx, the gravediggers of capitalism are the workers it produces and exploits. The working class assumes mythical, even heroic dimensions in the marxist discourse. Chapter 4 examines the role of workers in Marx's own conceptual edifice, stressing his confidence in workers' creativity and self-organizing capabilities. The Russian Revolution in practice substituted the Bolshevik party for the working class as historical agent for change. In conditions of underdevelopment and a largely rural society, it was unrealistic to expect the urban proletariat to act as an enlightened vanguard and carry the rest of society with them. This substitutionism was, however, to have a huge impact on the subsequent development of the socialist and communist traditions. In recent decades, debates have shifted towards the growing incorporation of the working class into bourgeois society, at least in the advanced capitalist countries. The new social movements have, in practice,

created a more diverse anti-capitalist movement today. With the centrality of the working class gone, in practice and in theory, where does this leave the traditional marxist project of social transformation?

At various times the socialist and feminist political movements have come close together but any rapprochement has been temporary. In Chapter 5 there is an examination of the various attempts to 'marry' the two traditions, with their usually unhappy consequences. Marx's own writings on women were scattered and hardly satisfactory as a theoretical treatment, but his close colleague Engels did dedicate serious work to the 'woman question' as it became known in the socialist tradition. Our story goes from there, to the early Soviet debates and practices on gender matters and thus to current issues. For in the last 30 years, there has been a veritable explosion of feminist theory and practice for which the 'marxist question' is not the only one on the agenda. What does a 'socialist feminism' entail? What do we mean by 'postmodern feminism'? These are some of the questions considered critically in this chapter. Marxism is not the only androcentric theory in the world, but its predominantly male bias has inevitably constrained its prospects as a guide to the liberation of the whole of humanity.

The cultural domain was for long relegated by marxism to a 'superstructure' dominated and determined by an economic 'base'. Chapter 6 examines the implications of this reductionist schema and shows how the superstructures had their revenge in the new cultural studies. The story goes from Marx's conception of ideology, the early Soviet attempt to create a 'proletarian culture' (*Proletkult*), to Antonio Gramsci's break with determinism and recognition of the full role of the cultural domain in capitalist societies. Gramsci acts as a hinge for the emergence in the 1970s of a 'culturalist' turn in marxism, examined critically in this chapter. With postmodernism, culture appears to be everywhere, all is culture; or so it would seem. From the neglect of culture we seem to have passed to the premature proclamation of the death of society. What postmodernism, and more clearly postcolonialism, has done is put a question mark under the previously undisputed hegemony of European culture. So, not only has marxism's economism been largely overcome but its Eurocentrism has also been 'corrected' in these recent debates.

Nationalism, has long been considered one of marxism's weak points, but then the whole of the Enlightenment tradition has trouble with nationalism. Chapter 7 traces the early, troubled and contradictory engagements of Marx and Engels with what they called the

'national question'. From this ambiguous legacy Lenin went on to construct the far more influential, but no less contradictory, theory of the 'right of nations to self-determination'. The explosion of national rivalries in what was once the Soviet Union shows the limitations of that approach. There is in marxist engagements with the national one lasting contribution, apart from Gramsci's, namely that of the Austro-Marxist, Otto Bauer, whose partial breakthrough is considered here. Finally, the chapter turns to nation and nationalism in the era of globalized post-modernism. There are no easy answers but we do, for example, have to recognize that all national phenomena are gendered, a blind spot of monumental implications in marxist and liberal approaches to the national alike. We are at least now beginning to understand nationalism as a discursive formation in its own right and not just as an 'epiphenomenon' of economic processes.

After the deluge of 1989 when communism collapsed like a house of cards, what future can there be for marxism? Chapter 8 concludes this text with an examination of the varied responses from marxists to the fate of what was coyly known as 'actually existing socialism'. For some it led to a form of political amnesia in which marxism just evaporated. Others, like the Bourbons in France, simply learnt nothing and argued that their particular brand of marxist catechism had actually been vindicated. I think the previous chapters add up to a verdict that we are now post/past orthodox modernist-manicheist-marxism. But what about a 'postmodern marxism', if we can envisage such a hybrid? For orthodox marxists this would be inconceivable and conservative post-modernists would be horrified. Previous chapters had already begun the task of engaging the 'ghost of Marx', as Derrida puts it, with current postmodern themes in regards to development, gender and culture for example. This final chapter broadens out this theme and seeks to develop more explicitly a critical deconstructionist marxist (if you want) method to better understand the world about us. Coming full circle to Chapter 1 on socialist trajectories there is a broad discussion of what a postmodern socialism might look like.

This text is written in a time of danger but also, I believe, one of opportunity. There is much turbulence and confusion, even chaos, across the world and within our subjectivities. 'All that is solid melts into air.' It is a time of paradigmatic transition, where the old is dead but the new is not yet born. I might as well admit that this book is written from a postmodernist perspective but one understood as a critique and even subversion of accepted truths. To some extent, also, it comes from a postcolonial perspective. What I cannot help thinking

about in May 1998, as the text is completed, are the famous *événements* of that other May, 30 years ago. In 1968 (1969, actually, in Latin America) there was a great speeding up of history, an irruption of culture into politics and the liberatory pulsations of the new social movements, especially the women's movement, began to be felt across the globe. In pursuing a theme such as Marx @ 2000 it would do no harm to bear in mind the slogan of May '68 ('Power to the Imagination!') and apply it imaginatively.

RONALDO MUNCK