



From here to there... to where?

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review of:

Therborn, G. (2008) *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* London and New York: Verso (HB: pp. 194 + xi, £14.99, ISBN: 978-184467 188 5).

According to the author's introduction, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* is intended as a 'traveller's notebook, unpretentious notes jotted down after a long, arduous journey through the climbs, passes, descents and dead ends of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Marxism' (p. x). Taking this as my cue, I shall jot down my own 'unpretentious notes' about *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*

The book comprises three chapters. Each chapter is actually written as a paper and each of these has already been published: two in *New Left Review* and the other as a contribution to *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, edited by Bryan S. Turner.

Göran Therborn has two aims in *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* First, 'to situate the left-wing political practice and thought of the early twenty-first century in the terrain of the previous century' and, second, 'to provide a systematic panorama of left-wing thought in the North at the beginning of the new century, to compare it with the Marxism of the preceding era' (p. x). Although Therborn asserts that the fate of Marxism is to be decided in the South, he goes on to admit that 'a systematic overview of contemporary Southern radical thought [is] beyond [his] linguistic competence as well as [his] time constraints' (p. xi). This admission unwittingly diminishes the potential usefulness of Therborn's book for reflecting on the future of Marxism.

The first chapter, 'Into the Twenty-first Century: The New Parameters of Global Politics', seeks 'to map the social space of Left-Right politics, from the 1960s to the first decade of the twenty-first century'. Therborn's intention in this chapter is 'to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the forces of Left and Right, in a broad, non-partisan sense – both during the recent past, which still bears forcefully of the present, and within emerging currents' (p. 1-2).

Here the author introduces a two-dimensional schema for understanding global 'political space', with irreverence–deference along one dimension and collectivism–individualism along the other. But this heuristic device is barely

developed or employed, and its various tensions are unexplored. For example, Therborn states that '[t]he classical Left was driven by the 'irreverent collectivism' of the socialist working-class and anti-imperialist movements, while other contemporary radical currents – for women's rights or human rights, for instance – have a more individualist character' (p. 4-5). On the one hand, this formulation seems to ignore the importance of the anarchist, anarcho-syndicalist, and libertarian to the 'classical' workers' movement. On the other, it neglects those activists and scholars – for example, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James and the Midnight Notes Collective – who have insisted that women's rights and 'human rights' issues such as capital punishment are, in fact, class issues.

The discussion in this chapter is oriented to the state, to institutional politics, to constituted power. The Left is mostly identified with Communist, Socialist, Social Democratic, and Workers' parties, whether in government or opposition. By and large, extra-parliamentary groupings and movements are ignored. There is no mention, let alone discussion, of *operaismo* and *autonomia* in Italy, of Solidarity in the UK, of the myriad groups active in the US in the 1960s and '70s: the Black Power movement, the Johnson-Forest Tendency and its studies of worker self-organisation, Students for a Democratic Society. The influential French group *Socialisme ou Barbarie* is mentioned only in passing and for the sole reason that Jean-François Lyotard left it. In fact, the author seems to regard these movements and struggles as *outside* the Left, for at one point he alludes to 'the failure of the Left to cope with the distributive conflicts that broke out during the economic crises of the seventies and eighties' (p. 23). (I would instead understand the various participants of these social struggles as *part of* the Left, albeit a divided Left in which Left parties and trade unions often did their utmost to undermine and even criminalise non-institutional movements.)

In a brief excursion to Latin America, Venezuela is reduced to Hugo Chavez (no mention of the 'struggle from below'), Bolivia is Evo Morales, Nicaragua the Sandinistas. Onward to Africa, where the Communist Party of South Africa and Samir Amin in Dakar are noted. In South Asia the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and 'Indian academia' get the nod. And so on. The only 'civil society' formations Therborn refers to are the World Social Forum and ATTAC. But since these are both linked with the Brazilian Workers' Party (the PT), the CPI(M) and various French Trotskyists – to the extent that many autonomist and anti-state types have refused or ceased to be involved – I am not sure they really count.

The subject of the second chapter is 'Twentieth-Century Marxism and the Dialectics of Modernity'. Therborn opens this chapter/paper by claiming that 'Marxism, as a social-historical phenomenon, has been Her Modern Majesty's Loyal Opposition to modernity – always critical of and fighting against her predominant regimes, but never questioning the legitimate majesty of modernity and, when needed, explicitly defending it' (p. 66). This is an intriguing idea, and probably quite an apt characterisation, but it is not really explored in the chapter. One could, for example, mention that towards the end of his life, as he studied the struggles in the Russian *mir*, Marx gave up his silly 'idiocy of rural life' perspective of *The Communist Manifesto* and instead came to believe that it might be possible for communism to emerge out of pre-capitalist societies. One could also mention the many struggles against Communist Party sponsored or supported

‘development’ over the course of the twentieth century. One could even mention that there is currently, in the Andean parts of Latin America, a debate on modern vis-à-vis (or versus) indigenous variants of Marxism. Such discussions, however, are conspicuously absent from Therborn’s analysis.

Instead, over the course of 45 pages, Therborn provides brief synopses of the thought of a series of more-or-less modern Marxists: Engels, Bebel, Bauer, Lenin, Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Lynd, C. Wright Mills, Habermas, and so on. Most thinkers are allotted just a paragraph or two, but there are longer sections on the critical theory of the Frankfurt school and ‘Western Marxism’. Therborn identifies those texts he considers most important and notes the founding of European and North American journals such as *Past and Present*, *New Left Review*, and *Monthly Review*.

What’s lacking here is any sense of excitement, intellectual or otherwise. Nor is there a great deal of historical context. Take as just one example the British Marxist historians, E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill, and Eric Hobsbawm, whom Therborn names. Reading *The Making of the English Working Class* or *The World Turned Upside Down*, say, brought me out in goose pimples, and this is decades after they were first published. Imagine the effect in the 1960s and ’70s, when ‘history-from-below’ was an entirely novel approach. Accounts of people making their own history (though not in circumstances of their own choosing)? This really was revolutionary stuff! (And of course, Hill’s book even inspired Leon Rosselson to write a song of the same name, about the Digger commune on St. George’s Hill, later made popular by Billy Bragg.) But the revolutions weren’t only intellectual. Therborn notes that the Historians’ Group of the Communist Party – of which Thompson, Hill, et al. were core members – broke up in 1956. Of course it did: this was the year Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary in order to put down a workers’ rebellion. The Hungarian uprising was a key event of the post-war period, which sparked intense debate across the Left. It turned Communist parties upside down, with thousands – including Thompson and Hill – tearing up their Party cards. Indeed, it was against Communist orthodoxy – the invasion of Hungary in particular, the suppression of debate and dissent in general – that Thompson and fellow CP dissident John Saville founded the journal the *New Reasoner*, which merged with *Universities and Left Review* to become *New Left Review* in 1960. Therborn does not once mention the Hungarian uprising.

The third and final chapter is entitled ‘After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in the North at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century’. Here Therborn begins by recounting the worldwide demise of Communist and Left political parties over the period of the past three or four decades and the related onslaught of neoliberalism. He then suggests that ‘the history of Marxism may best be seen as a triangulation’. Its three poles are (i) a ‘social science, in the broad Germanic sense of *Wissenschaft*, focused on the operation of capitalism and, more generally, on the historical developments determined ‘in the last instance’ by the dynamics of the forces and relations of production’; (ii) a ‘philosophy of contradictions or dialectics’; and (iii) a ‘mode of politics of a socialist, working-class kind, providing a compass and a road-map to the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order. The politics was the overdetermining apex of the triangle, making the ‘ism’ a social current, not just an intellectual lineage’ (pp. 116-117). But, this ‘Marxist triangle of social science, politics and philosophy has been broken – in all likelihood,

irremediably' (p. 119). Again, I find the possibly irremediably broken 'triangle' hypothesis intriguing, but it is not really developed. What is more developed, however, is a *two*-dimensional 'heuristic searching device' to help find 'current left-theoretico-political positions', which Therborn introduces later in the chapter. This has socialism—capitalism along one axis and Marxism—non-Marxist Left thought along the other.

In some ways, both the 'triangle' and the two-dimensional heuristic remind me of Harry Cleaver's (2000) schematic 'approaches to reading Marx' in *Reading Capital Politically*, in which he distinguishes and discusses 'political economy' readings, 'philosophical' readings, and 'political readings'. Cleaver's account of the development of Marxism over the course of the twentieth-century until the late 1970s (when his book was first published) attempts to demonstrate both how Marxist thinkers responded to the real struggles and changes in capitalism *and* how such thinkers sought to shape such struggles. In contrast, Therborn's history tends to be exclusively intellectual. Thus, in his account, Marxism must respond to the challenges of postmodernism or poststructuralism, such as the work of Frederick Jameson or Jacques Derrida. Absent are the myriad struggles of the 1960s and '70s, as diverse groups – women, students, blacks, queers, etc. – sought to escape invisibility and/or stultifying and universalising identities and roles.

The Left's 'resilience' is also argued almost exclusively through reference to intellectual currents, journals, and books. Therborn provides exuberant praise for *New Left Review* ('the generally recognized flagship of left-wing social thought', '[b]rilliance and radicalism have been the *NLR* criteria for publication, never orthodoxy of any kind') and its 'guiding spirit' Perry Anderson ('not only a major Marxist historical scholar but also a master of intellectual critique'). He also notes with approval the German publications *Das Argument*, *Prokla*, and *Sozialismus*, as well as other Anglophone journals such as *Capital and Class*, *Socialist Register*, *Rethinking Marxism*, *Historical Materialism*, *Monthly Review*, and *Science and Society* (p. 172-74). Little or no reference is made to the wave of struggles that have engulfed the planet over the past 15 years or so, which have arguably contributed to capitalism's present crisis – see Midnight Notes Collective and Friends (2009).

As a final comment, it seems worth mentioning that *New Left Review* and its publishing arm Verso are significantly overrepresented in *From Marxism to Post-Marxism? A* quick count of references in the footnotes reveals that, of the 230-odd books and articles cited, 60 – more than one-quarter – were published either by Verso (or its precursor New Left Books) or by *NLR*. When the 50 or so foreign-language texts are excluded that proportion rises to one-third. Make of that what you will.

references

- Cleaver, H. (2000) *Reading Capital Politically* [2nd edition]. Leeds: Anti/Theses and Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Midnight Notes Collective and Friends (2009) *Promissory Notes: From Crisis to Commons*, Jamaica Plain, M.A.: Midnight Notes. [<http://www.midnightnotes.org/Promissory%20Notes.pdf>].

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