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Why Marx was right

- Reviews section -

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“So you’re for the revolutionary Marxist overthrow of parliamentary democracy then”. This was the question flung by presenter Andrew Neil in a discussion on the BBC’s Daily Politics Show at Right to Work campaigner and SWP member Michael Bradley following a successful protest against the British government’s punitive work experience programme. [1] He fielded this and other questions pretty well although his direct comparison between the Egyptian events and Britain was less effective.

Terry Eagleton’s [2] book is a particularly useful primer for taking on these sorts of arguments. In relation to the Neil question in Chapter 9 he shows how Marx denounced both the limits of parliamentary democracy and yet supported the progressive reforms even a bourgeois state can be forced to make. Marx defended the democratic gains of bourgeois democracy but saw the need for its transformation into a higher form of democracy based on workers controlling production. In other words in ‘normal political times’ he did not simplistically counterpose parliamentary democracy to abstract notions of workers councils. Nevertheless he clearly sided with the Paris Commune in a revolutionary situation when one form came into conflict with the other because it is a higher form of democracy supported by a growing majority of working people. He argued against crude ultra-left opposition to every aspect of the state, making a distinction in Capital Vol 3 between the class-specific and class neutral functions of the state. As Eagleton states:

“Detectives who carry off computers loaded with child pornography are not brutally violating human rights.” (pg 199)

Marx reserved most of his venom for the way in which the bourgeois state tries to pass itself off as a source of harmony, uniting classes in a national family as the government and media will be doing this year in Britain with the Jubilee. It is important for socialists to respond to objections to Marxism in a way that is theoretically sound and referenced in a contemporary way, otherwise you lose any hope of keeping contact with people newly interested in Marxist ideas.

Eagleton provides us with nine other chapters dealing with the following points:

? Marxism is irrelevant because our society has fundamentally changed, it is increasingly classless, socially mobile and post-industrial, quite different to the world when Marx was writing.

? It has never worked in practice – look at what has happened in the Soviet Union or China.

? The ideas of Marx are crudely determinist, men and women are the tools of history and they are stripped of freedom and individuality.

? Human nature just does not fit with Marxist theory, we are naturally selfish, acquisitive, aggressive and competitive creatures

? Marx is an economic determinist, art, religion, war, politics morality are seen as just reflection of the economy or of class struggle.

? His materialism means spirituality or religion is dismissed and consciousness is just a reflex of the material world. Morality is about the ends justifying the means.

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? Class as understood by Marx is no more, the industrial working class has disappeared and the revolutionary worker is a figment of the Marxist imagination

? Marxists are advocates of violent minority action, running roughshod over democracy and causing chaotic situations

? The most interesting radical movements of the past four decades such as feminism, environmentalism, gay and ethnic politics have sprung up from outside Marxism and have now taken over from antiquated forms of class struggle.

In each chapter Eagleton combines a return to Marx's writings with pertinent quotes and the input of other Marxists who have dealt with these issues. He peppers the text with some humour that is not always particularly funny, more like your dad's well used jokes, but it does lighten the tone and often makes a point:

"Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the US Federal Reserve, believed for much of his professional life that so-called free markets were rooted in human nature, a claim as absurd as holding that admiring Cliff Richard is rooted in human nature." (p 97)

Another great strength of the book is the consistent effort to correctly define what the Historical Materialist method can help explain and what it cannot do – he caresses the limits of Marxism very adroitly. His chapter rejecting the charge that Marx was a crude determinist is particularly strong.

"We sometimes call a thing fundamental if it is the necessary basis for something else; but it is hard to see that class struggle is the necessary basis for religious faith, scientific discovery or women's oppression, much involved with it though these things are (...) So what is class struggle fundamental to? Marx's answer would seem twofold. It shapes a great many events, institutions and forms of thought which seem at first glance to be innocent of it; and it plays a decisive role in the turbulent transition from one epoch of history to another. By history, Marx does not mean "everything that has ever happened", but a specific trajectory underlying it. He is using 'history' in the sense of the significant course of events, not as a synonym for the whole of human existence to date(...) what is unique about his thought is that he locks these two ideas – class struggle and mode of production – together to provide a historical scenario which is indeed genuinely new." (pp 35/36)

This is well argued inoculation against the totalising dangers of dialectical materialism which we saw with disastrous consequences in the Lysenko affair in Stalinist Russia or ultra-left analyses that reduce very work of art to a crude class contest. It picks out the specific originality and richness of Marx's thought.

At times the text reads like some the late Bensaid's writings – open, paradoxical and poetic – as Eagleton grapples with the contradictory or dialectical vision of Marx. For example when dealing with the objection that Marx is just an idealist utopian:

"Realism and vision here go hand in hand: to see the present as it truly is, is to see it in the light of its possible transformation. Otherwise you are simply not seeing it aright, as you would not have a full grasp of what it means to be a baby if you had not realised that it was a potential adult. Capitalism has given birth to extraordinary powers and possibilities which it simultaneously stymies; and this is why Marx can be hopeful without being a bright-eyed champion of Progress, and brutally realistic without being cynical or defeatist." (page 77)

This section is relevant to how we respond to books like Steven Pinker's "The Better Angels of our Nature" (2011) which gives a lot of empirical evidence to show humanity has on the whole progressed – there is less everyday violence experienced today than before and this has been the case over the long term. Without endorsing Pinker's overall framework I think Marxists can live with a lot of the analysis he makes about progress and the material factors

behind it. Eagleton shows how Marx's idea of the transition to socialism/communism does have a material basis in the progress brought even by capitalism despite the human costs that were incurred such as the slave trade and other horrors (see pages 60 or 93). Although socialists have a moral objection to capitalism and class society it is not solely based on that. What distinguishes a Marxist analysis of the present recession from a purely moralistic one often put forward by social democrats or some newly radicalising activists is that the bankers wrecked the economy and people's lives not because they were inherently evil people but because they were acting rationally within the constraints of capitalist social relations. That explains why the odd banker can be quite a pleasant individual or can even agree with you that the system is a complete mess (I recently taught English to a derivatives trader from Germany who was of that ilk!).

Eagleton is particularly good at highlighting the contradictions in the other side's arguments, here are a few examples among many:

"Critics of Marx might find this stress on class interests distasteful. But they cannot claim in the same breath that he has an impossibility rosy view of human nature." (p 79) or

"Marxists do not believe that the mighty liberal lineage from Thomas Jefferson to John Stuart Mill is annulled by the existence of secret CIA-run prisons for torturing Muslims, even though such prisons are part of the politics of today's liberal societies. Yet the critics of Marxism are rarely willing to concede that show trials and mass terror are no refutation of it." (pp 22-23)

"Some of those who think socialism is unworkable are confident that they can eradicate poverty, solve the global warming crisis, spread liberal democracy to Afghanistan and resolve world conflicts by United Nations resolutions. All these daunting tasks are comfortably within the range of the possible. It is only socialism which for some mysterious reason is out of reach." (p 88)

Each chapter has a series of useful points and the beauty of this book is it can be used as a source to dip in and out of since each chapter can be read alone. Let us take a look at one more point he makes about whether revolutionary action advocated by Marxists inevitably leads to violence and then despotic repression. Eagleton turns the argument neatly back onto his opponents by showing how these deniers of the efficacy of revolutionary crisis and action do not recognise how existing capitalist society emerged from revolutionary crisis and revolutionary actions:

"If we ourselves are the products of a supremely successful revolution, then this in itself is an answer to the conservative charge that all revolutions end up be failing, or reverting to how things were before, or making things a thousand times worse, or eating up their own children. Perhaps I missed the announcement in the newspapers, but France does not seem to have re-instated the feudal aristocracy.." (p 182)

If you wanted to quibble about any weaknesses in the book you could argue that a chapter taking up the challenges on a more economic level to Marxism would have been interesting - for example on the falling rate of profit debate. A deeper analysis of how bureaucracies are formed (perhaps drawing on Michel Lowy's work) would be useful too. Also the obvious historically consequent lacunae in Marx's thought around racism, ethnicity, women's oppression and ecology could have been addressed in more depth rather than being bundled up in the last chapter and treated in slightly less depth than some of the other issues. If readers are interested there is an interesting collection of articles about just such issues written around the 150th anniversary of the Communist Manifesto in 1998 that has been published on the Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres website [ESSF](#).

However this book is not only helpful for everyday debates with people at meetings, in the street or in the workplace but also for responding to the teachers or lecturers who give an academic critique of Marxism. One thing that could be improved with the book's presentation is to have proper titles for the ten chapters rather than numbers. It was difficult to quickly go back to the chapter about human nature or about changes in the working class. On the other

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hand accessible footnotes to other books are particularly useful. Eagleton's generally ecumenical approach to the families of the left is reflected in his references where there is room for G.A. Cohen (from a CP background), Chris Harman (SWP) and Ernest Mandel (Fourth International). He highlights a large number of classic essays from the New Left Review (NLR). Unlike some of the NLR writers Eagleton keeps his prose understandable without dumbing down.

As the title suggests Eagleton rejects the usual academic posture of sitting on the fence; he defends the overall plausibility of Marx's historical materialism. For a period Eagleton was politically involved with revolutionary Marxist groups and although no longer aligned in this way he has maintained a radical political critique of capitalist society and reformism, unlike many erstwhile academic Marxists of the post 60s generation. His main professional work has been in the field of literary theory where he has developed a flexible Marxist-inspired framework for understanding literature and culture. Particularly useful has been his relentless attack on post-modernism. The latter has achieved some influence in academia and in a simplified way in everyday ideology. Post-modernism embraces relativism and rejects any basic absolutes or coherent historical narrative. Its political impact is to deny the utility of political action itself.

In recent times the writer has hit the headlines for his polemic with renowned English novelist Martin Amis over his anti-Islamist rants and in his debate with Richard Dawkins on religion where he criticises what he calls Dawkins' fundamentalist atheism.

This book represents a continuing attempt to engage with important contemporary issues. In many ways it has the advantage of not being written by somebody from a single political tendency since it does not mix the arguments up with intermittent calls to join the one true revolutionary party. It would definitely be a useful addition to any socialist's library. This is particularly important today as the crisis is producing a wider interest in critiques of capitalism especially among young people.

[1] See [BBC](#).

[2] Terry Eagleton has written extensively on Literature, Culture, Ideology, Religion and Literary Theory from a broadly Marxist standpoint from the 1970s. He is currently professor at Lancaster University but has worked at Cambridge, Oxford and Manchester universities as well as having temporary positions at Notre Dame and Yale University. He has regularly participated in public debates in the press and is probably Britain's best-known literary theorist and critic.