



The Hegel–Marx Connection

Tony Burns and Ian Fraser (eds.)

Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2000, 258pp.

ISBN: 0 333 75136 1.

Marxism, The Millennium and Beyond

Mark Cowling and Paul Reynolds (eds.)

Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2000, 318pp.

ISBN: 0 333 80166 0.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) 2, 367–369. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300063

Marxists can sometimes be a funny bunch. Having spent most of the 1990s with their heads down while virtually everyone else shouted about the ‘end of history’ (aka the ‘impossibility of communism’ and thus by implication the ‘stupidity of Marxism’), recent years have seen them punching the air with delight. A combination of the discovery that one of the best analyses of what is called ‘globalization’ can be found in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, a litany of corporate corruption and failures, dramatic falls on the stock market and the sheer unmitigated nastiness of supposedly left-leaning governments, appear to have generated a new lease of life for Marxism. Books with titles such as *Marx’s Revenge* have received plenty of positive reviews in the non-Marxist as well as Marxist press, new journals such as *Historical Materialism* have been launched containing sharp and incisive new work, and major conferences such as ‘The Return of Marx’ (London, June 2002) suggest there is life in the old dog and his minders yet.

The two books under review seem on one level to be miles apart: one concerns the intellectual relationship between Marx and one of his most important influences, the other on the future of Marxism. Can they, either together or separately, justify yet another punch of the air? Do they, either together or separately, tell us anything about the state of Marxist thought in Britain today?

The Burns and Fraser collection contains essays not only on some of the standard issues in the Hegel–Marx connection (questions of method, recognition, the end of history, and more general accounts of the relationship between the two thinkers), but also some not so standard issues (IR, Marx’s doctoral dissertation). How useful these will be might depend on one’s interests or how one feels about the issues that are missing, but for the Hegel–Marx scholar the collection as a whole may well prove to be as valuable as many texts in the increasingly large body of literature on the relation between the two thinkers.



The collection of essays edited by Cowling and Reynolds necessarily contains a more diverse range of essays. There is something deeply troubling about the book which, given that it was borne out of the 1998 conference of the Marxism Specialist Group of the Political Studies Association, might well be symptomatic of the state of Marxism in Britain. Many of the essays take as their cue the writings of other individuals or traditions, such as post-Marxism, feminism, Alisdair MacIntyre, Agnes Heller or Jurgen Habermas. And in many cases these are engaged in a constructively critical way, such that Marxism would appear to be reasserted either by rebutting other positions or incorporating some of their more useful insights.

As a method, this is fine as it goes. But what is troubling about the book is the way in which the language of Marxism is gradually dissipated through such encounters. In the essay on 'Recent Developments in State Theory', for example, Bob Jessop aims to trace the 'interesting parallels between these different [Foucauldian, feminist and discourse-analytic] waves of theorizing' in order to explore their implications for future Marxist work on state power. In so doing, Jessop claims to show how, to give one example, Gramsci's work on the 'concrete modalities of state power' is 'compatible with...discourse theory, feminism, Foucauldian analyses, and post-modernism'. Really? Well yes, if you completely obliterate the fact that Gramsci's account of the state and civil society was shot through with the language of class. If you obliterate, in other words, the fact that Gramsci was a Marxist.

A similar point could be made about the book as a whole. The question of class antagonism as an insoluble contradiction of capitalist society first appears as an issue on p. 148 in a quote from Engels. The issue receives no sustained treatment until p. 161, and then in the context of Eastern Europe. Symptomatically, the index entry for 'class, Marx's theory of' has p. 308 as the only reference—virtually the end of the book. Similar comments might be made about other key categories of Marxist analysis such as exploitation.

How we reached the state where for many British Marxists, Marxism in the new millennium should have little connecting it with Marxism in the old one is too big a question to be answered here. In terms of this book a short answer might well lie in the fact that the opening section 'Towards a Feasible Socialist Politics' (note: not a feasible *Marxist* politics) begins with the essay 'What do Socialists Want?' by Alan Carling. Building on the techniques of analytical Marxism, Carling reveals that the aims of socialism are autonomy and equality. While not all the contributors agree with Carling on this score, it is telling that the book as a whole begins with an example of the kind of damage done to Marxism from within the recent past. A demand for autonomy and equality may be liberalism. It may even (for some) be socialism. But it sure ain't Marxism.



In their Introduction, Cowling and Reynolds claim that ‘virtually nothing is said in the [opening] section about Hegel’, as though that might somehow make a difference. But then since when was Hegel the source of Marx’s politics? His method maybe, but his politics? No doubt Cowling and Reynolds have in mind arguments such as Joe McCarney’s in the Burns and Fraser collection, for McCarney is an example of those Hegel–Marx scholars who do indeed believe that ‘the project which unites Hegel and Marx...is the project of a dialectical theory in the service of human freedom’. This is not an unusual position, and those who hold it seem not to mind that Hegel never quite got round to becoming a fully paid up member of the Communist Party or the fact that the argument falls apart once one tries to unpick the substance of that ‘human freedom’ (i.e. once one tries to unpick the difference between communism and capitalism). And as for the Burns–Fraser book as a whole, the issues left out turn out to be the same issues missing from the Cowling–Reynolds: virtually nothing is said about class, exploitation, or the way Marx forged his account of the state through a critique of Hegel.

In many ways then, these books are both stimulating and depressing. The individual contributions vary from the interesting to the obvious, and the extent to which they are either may well depend on the reader’s own tastes and prior knowledge. But taken as a whole, the contributions suggest that maybe all that air-punching is premature. Not waving but drowning.

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