



Book Review

Poststructuralism, Marxism and Neoliberalism. Between Theory and Politics

Michael A. Peters

Rowman and Littlefield, Oxford, 2001, ix + 159pp.

Paperback, ISBN: 0 7425 0987 7.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) 2, 137–138. doi:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300069

When it comes to their politics, poststructuralists have endured their fair share of name-calling. They have been labelled as everything from new, neo and young conservatives to liberal reformists, individualist relativists, apologists for consumer capitalism, and many varieties of foul leftist subversives. While this has all been unfair (the product of prejudice and unforgivable misreading) poststructuralists must themselves take responsibility for they have failed to provide a clear enunciation of the sorts of politics (concrete as well as abstract) that can logically and coherently be derived from poststructuralist premises. It is the nature of poststructuralism not to lend itself to systematic enunciation in the political field, constituting itself as a form of critique, but dense readings of a multitude of ‘texts’ do not a politics make. The point of Michael Peters’ book is to demonstrate to left-wing thinkers that poststructuralism is politically significant, that it has systematically and productively engaged with Marxism and is deeply involved in the ongoing critique of contemporary neo-liberalism providing concepts that can be used in the analysis of current reforms of the welfare state.

Written in a fairly accessible style and properly focused on the topics it has set for itself the book opens with a chapter sketching the convergence of poststructuralism with Marxism placing the former in the critical tradition of Western Marxism. Peters emphasizes Deleuze’s Nietzschean rejection of the Hegelian dialectic that enabled the formation of a libidinal materialism, in which the concept of a ‘will to power’ balances Marx’s interest in economic power with Freud’s focus on desire giving us the notion of ‘desiring production’. He also examines the engagements with Marx, of Derrida and Foucault, and subsequent chapters investigate these thinkers and their politics more deeply.

Chapter 2 introduces the writing of Lyotard, examining his relationship to Marxism and explicating his theory of knowledge production as a critical analysis of late capitalism that Peters employs in a brief discussion of issues of educational and pedagogical practice. Next, he examines Derrida emphasizing that, contrary to widespread misconception, Derrida has not ‘liquidated’ the subject but only questioned it asking after its conditions of possibility. Peters links this to Derrida’s political writings on both Marx and global Neoliberalism. In examining Foucault, Peters shifts register a little explaining the later work on ‘governmentality’ and opening out into a general summary of recent work in this



field especially as it relates to critical analysis of reforms of the welfare state. This leads on to key contemporary themes centred on 'responsibilization' and new technologies of the self-employed by state agencies and links into Chapter 5 on Deleuze. After a brief introduction to his work, Peters shows how Deleuze's concept of the control society can be applied to the analysis of educational spaces and to the emergent regime of the knowledge economy.

In general, the book offers helpful summaries of some aspects of the work of the major thinkers associated with poststructuralism. However, Peters does not truly explicate the link between the political implications of their work and their wider philosophies. It is ultimately not clear that we really need libidinal materialism to explain to us how reforms of the welfare state are shaping us up for the knowledge economy. But the primary problem, as with most poststructuralist attempts to speak clearly of politics, is that while we are offered interesting and often clear critical descriptions of the present situation the book takes for granted that we, the reader, will reject what is going on without providing a reason for us to do so. I suspect that if one confronted members of, say, the Blair government and charged them with using the welfare state to create subjects fit to be cogs in the productive machine of the knowledge economy, they would (if they understood) accept the charge since they interpret their task as exactly that. What else is a social democratic state for if not managing the gap between the demands of the economy and the wants of the people? And if the people want to have high-paying jobs and lots of consumer goodies then they need to be enabled to work. That, at least, would be the defence.

In the final chapter, Peters criticizes the neoliberal regime for being totalizing in its thinking, based on a foundational individualism that screens out difference and thus, paradoxically, limits the flowering of individualism. He is undoubtedly right to set his sights on the pernicious influence of forms of rational choice theory whose simplistic nostrums are an astonishingly hegemonic force; yet these criticisms still amount to little that is concrete, producing only vague closing headlines about alternatives. This is not Peters' fault for it is a problem all we poststructuralists face. Students and their teachers will find this book useful as an introduction to some complex ideas and as a demonstration of their applicability. As an educationalist Peters' knowledge of policy is admirable and he makes good use of it blending theory and policy analysis in a way that is often absent from allegedly political books. However, the danger remains that when it comes to the hard political claims of the book, and given the absence of a strong (dare I say it?) normative motivation the unconverted will say 'so what?'

Alan Finlayson, Department of Politics & International Relations
University of Wales.