



Leaving Marxism. Studies in the Dissolution of an Ideology

Stanley Pierson

Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 2001, 255pp.

ISBN: 0-8047-4404-1.

Contemporary Political Theory (2003) **2**, 237–239. DOI:10.1057/palgrave.cpt.9300046

This book is supposedly about the ‘failure’ or ‘collapse’ of Marxism. The bulk of it consists, however, of intellectual biographies and exegeses of the work of three disparate figures tentatively united in being ex-Marxists: Paul de Man, Max Horkheimer and Leszek Kolakowski. Each essay, which recounts with extensive textual support the main ideas and theoretical development of each writer, could almost stand alone as an introduction to and examination of these authors.

The uniting theme — the alleged dissolution of Marxism — arises substantially only in the introduction and conclusion. This is as well, since the material presented is insufficient for any substantive examination of this subject. Stanley Pierson’s thesis is that Marxism relies, for its popular support, mainly on quasi-religious messianic, mythical and eschatological appeals (pp. 179–180). Hence, he refers repeatedly to Marxism as a ‘faith’ (e.g. pp. 3, 92, 138) with ‘millennial hopes’ for a ‘promised land’ (p. 27), ‘apostolic zeal’ (p. 38) and a ‘theological’ outlook (p. 11). Although his conclusion suggests that he has derived this view from the exegeses, it is already presupposed in his general problematic. Further, Pierson’s thesis could only be examined effectively through a study of grassroots supporters of Marxist movements; evidence drawn from remarks after the event (pp. 36–37, 41) by three atypical individuals is simply insufficient. Pierson’s ability validly to make such claims is further compromised by the lack of any comparison of his chosen authors with others who remained within Marxism, or indeed with Marx. Furthermore, since the ‘Marxism’ to which he compares them is a restricted orthodoxy incompatible with ethical positions (pp. 38, 85), it is unclear whether the three authors were ever sufficiently within ‘Marxism’ to be said to have left it. It is often unclear whether Marx, social-democratic economism or Stalinism is Pierson’s main polemical target. Also, his reading of Nietzsche in the introduction is selective, and creatively applied: the claim that Lenin, because he pursued power, was a Nietzschean without the terminology (pp. 25, 27) stretches the idea of intellectual influence to the limits of its usefulness and beyond. Also, Pierson fails to follow up the Nietzschean theme in the substantive chapters or conclusion, weakening his supposed guiding narrative greatly.



Pierson pursues a class analysis throughout, especially against de Man. However, his claims are contentious. The epithet 'bourgeois' is overused and never defined. It covers, among other things, any kind of ethical commitment (e.g. to dignity or equality), any rationality, and such contradictory phenomena as hedonism, asceticism, belief in individual autonomy and glorification of communities of work (pp. 12–13, 21, 33, 43, 45, 62, 74). Opposing bourgeois social forms for ethical reasons is bourgeois, and so is a distaste for bourgeois influence on the working class (pp. 41, 44–45, 60). Industry, even without capitalist control, is bourgeois (p. 59), and so are the values capitalism destroys (p. 113). Contempt for bourgeois social institutions is also bourgeois (pp. 78–79). Further, de Man is criticized for glorifying his family; Horkheimer for rebelling against his (pp. 35, 78).

The concept 'bourgeois' is, therefore, badly developed, throwing further doubt on Pierson's main thesis. A central part of his objection to Marxism is his claim that it is a bourgeois ideology confounded by the realities of working-class life (pp. 2–3). Thus, revolutionary principles are 'political disabilities' (p. 11) derived from bourgeois values and promoted by intellectuals at the expense of workers' interests (p. 13), and socialism is a bourgeois movement which was sidetracked by proletarian material interests (p. 45). The weakness of his concept of the 'bourgeois' creates serious problems for this account. Further, Pierson chastises de Man for lacking confidence in the 'qualities of mind and spirit' of the working class (p. 74), yet never specifies what these qualities are, beyond a constant refrain that working-class concerns are 'immediate' and 'material' (e.g. pp. 35, 45–46). He completely ignores workers' own demands for dignity and autonomy and the incipient ethics so often documented by social historians, not to mention the occasions (such as the Paris Commune and the Spanish Civil War) when workers displayed directly revolutionary aspirations. It is naive and almost messianic to assume that demands can, in an unmediated way, be 'material' and 'immediate'; demands invariably have some degree of ethical content, and the broad sweep of Pierson's critique precludes discussion of the specificity of working-class ethics.

Further, the agenda of naive realism which was often counterposed to Marxism in the period Pierson studies was itself often the property of intellectuals and leaders. Pierson assumes that the electoral and propagandist appeal of such an agenda reveals its authentically proletarian character, but the disputes in question, if examined closely, turn out to be between intellectuals, rather than expressing an intellectual/worker divide. As regards de Man's educational efforts, for instance, it was not workers but trade-union and party leaders whose interference sabotaged his project (pp. 40, 65). The problem is that Pierson accepts social-democrats' claims to 'protect working-class interests' (p. 64), to be making necessary 'compromises' (pp. 64, 67) and performing useful social functions in an ontologically privileged 'real world'



(p. 81). Yet social–democratic leaders are often of what Pierson would term ‘bourgeois’ origins, and draw heavily on ‘bourgeois’ theories. Many have abandoned or let down the working class. Also, if Pierson’s criticism is that Marxism is elitist and distant from reality, it is hard to see how de Man, Horkheimer or Kolakowski became less so by their abandonment of it; his indulgence towards Kolakowski in particular is in stark contrast to his hostility to Marxism.

It is fortunate, therefore, that what Pierson does in the main body of the text is only superficially related to what it is supposed to demonstrate. While Pierson’s general problematic is riddled with holes, his readings of the three authors are informative, concise, wide ranging and well referenced. The validity and usefulness of this book increases greatly if it is treated as a collection of essays on three former Marxists, rather than in terms of its professed project.

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