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## EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

### A REFLECTION ON SECULARISM, ELITISM AND EPISTEMOLOGY

This little tale has threads tying together the early 1960s, Oxford, G. A. Cohen, R. C. Tucker, and (last and certainly least!) myself.

In 1961, Robert C. Tucker published his *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*, a book that was to become quite influential, through numerous editions. That same year G. A. Cohen began studying philosophy at Oxford University. One year later, the undersigned editor, then an undergraduate transfer student at Ruskin College, Oxford (see also “Editorial Perspectives,” October 2009), undertook, in an oral presentation, a critique of Tucker’s central thesis, as stated in a course of lectures on Political Theory given at Ruskin by Dr. Jay Blumler. And just last year, the *Literary Review of Canada* (June, 2010) published an essay by Andy Lamey on Cohen’s work — focusing on *Why Not Socialism*, but reviewing Cohen’s entire corpus up to his untimely death in 2009.

What ties all this together? Tucker’s main idea can be stated simply: Marxism is, essentially, a *secular religion*. My 1962 critique, if I remember it correctly, consisted in the observation that “secular religion” is an oxymoron: religion inherently and necessarily involves the concept of God. Lacking God, Marxism is indeed secular, but not a religion. QED. But things stay with you, and all these years later I see that Tucker’s position actually involved a complex epistemological argument, one that Marxists should address. Marxism, as he saw it, makes claims that go beyond any that can be verified by the normal methods of science, as derived from the empiricist or positivist tradition associated with the then (and now) dominant Analytical School. Thus: philosophical realism is a working hypothesis, but *materialism* is an unsupportable doctrine that cannot provide scientific support for its central element — the thing-in-itself, existing objectively and independently of the sensations to which it gives rise. *Dialectics* is an untenable concept, and a substitute for rigorous thought, inconsistent with formal logic. *Social class* is a reification, and again a sloppy replacement for what alone actually exists: individuals, and self-conscious coalitions of individuals. And so on. To fall short according to the “philosophy of science” is to fall short of science as

such. Hence, the “charge” against Marxism of being a religion, albeit the curious secular variety.

Now I have come to think that the quality of Marxism that really frightened the mainstream academic establishment in the 20th century (and, indeed, still does today) is this: here, for (almost) the first time in history, was a *secular* ideology that had become the property of a mass movement. For the bourgeoisie, thought could be secular (there was, after all, a need for science, and for organic intellectuals); it could be popular (religion, the non-secular kind, played an important role ensuring social control); but *secular* and *popular* together formed a dangerous combination.<sup>1</sup> The way to keep science out of the hands of the working masses was to encase it within a philosophy that kept its truth claims well within certain boundaries of contingency and indeterminacy. The *empiricist* mindset (not, of course, to be confused with *empirical* research as a moment within scientific practice as such) places thought at the mercy of the fortuitous and random, holding the capacity for effective generalization hostage to underlying forces that are spontaneously reproduced by the social process and therefore resist comprehension. Empiricism is therefore functional for an intellectual establishment that rests upon, and both can and must take for granted, a given structure of social power. Any attempt to go beyond this conservative framework by positing (for example) the ability to *generalize about the non-observable* must take on an aura of meta-science, or religion.

That was precisely Tucker’s complaint about Marxism: it seeks to transcend the limitations of the commonplace. But such transcendence is essential if a *secular* ideology is to sink deep roots among *wide circles* of people. If this is right, then Marxism’s claim to epistemological novelty lies in the proposition that knowledge is social, not individual. Antonio Gramsci once observed that “ordinary” workers often do not personally have “the facts” in hand to substantiate their beliefs; they hold onto the beliefs nevertheless because they are confident of their existence within a social network that confirms them. The ultimate “proof” of materialism and dialectics, therefore, is not *individual* practice; the classical “interpretive” materialism created this false choice between lapsing into either pragmatism or some sort of *verstehen* idealism. It is, rather, *social* practice. It is possible to transcend the commonplace *and* remain secular, if we treat materialism, and dialectics, and class, and revolution, as continually evolving and developing elements within an ever-more-democratic and worldwide social practice.

1 The grand exception, of course, is nationalism — a popular and secular ideological formation whose functionality for and compatibility with capitalism is obvious. Perhaps the danger lies in the popular-secular combination on universalizing, rather than arbitrarily particularizing, terrain.

Now all this is the beginning of an argument, not the end of one! The question for the moment is: does it amount to *bullshit Marxism*? This, as Lamey reminds us, was Jerry Cohen's term for much of the non- or pre-Analytical Marxism that he saw around him during the 1960s and 70s, while on his way toward *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (1978). My tentative answer is: no — so long as we hold onto the social and democratic matrix within which we can, and should, ask the tough analytical questions.

But the convergence between Tucker and Cohen remains an issue: The *objectively elitist* nature of the Analytical demand prompted Tucker to characterize Marxism *tout court* as a religion, and Cohen (and others of the loosely defined Analytical Marxist "school") to jettison major components of Marxist theory and tradition in the search for a degree of sophistication, nuance and rigor that just might be acceptable within the capitalist academy. Characteristically, Lamey's essay on Cohen is entitled: "The Thinking Man's Marxist." Aside from the arrogant implicit assumption that the person using this term is indeed just such a "man" (or "woman"?), one must assume that this "thinking" community of scholars is quite an elite club, membership in which is not conceivable for the undereducated millions and billions around the globe.

This is not an anti-intellectual plea for lowering of logical and empirical standards! (It would be very strange indeed for such a position to appear in the editorial pages of this journal.) It is, rather, a call to consider the possibility that progress in critical social theory results not from academic laboratories *alone*, wherein high analytical standards must be applied. Here the 20th century holds important lessons for us. Consider some of the classical texts from that century that sought to spread the essentials of Marxist understanding beyond narrow intellectual circles: Lenin's *The Three Sources and Constituent Parts of Marxism*, Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* and *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*, Mao's *On Contradiction* and *Four Essays on Philosophy*, Kuusinen's *Fundamentals of Marxism-Leninism*. When these works, sometimes referred to with slight derogation as "Chinese and Soviet manuals," are compared with, *e.g.*, Lukács, or Gramsci, or, for that matter, G. A. Cohen, what standard of comparison is being used? Certainly the classic texts indulge in generalizations and make relatively un-nuanced claims. Are these claims being evaluated in relation to the purpose for which they were intended? Perhaps most important (for the general theme of this essay): did they contribute to the dissemination of Marxism in their time, and therefore to the eventual progress toward rigor and clarity in the hands of not just intellectual professionals, but rather untold millions of potential actors on the world stage?

These are loaded questions, of course, but the morals may be, first, that all men — and women — "think"; second, that rigorous standards in theory should not be confused with, or placed in the service of, elitism; and

finally, that the core concepts of Marxism are continually evolving and full of promise — to be neither thrown overboard nor reified and treated as static or non-problematic. If being considered practitioners of a secular religion, or purveyors of bullshit Marxism, is the price we must pay for refusing to bottle Marxism up in a form that cannot be accessed by those untold millions, it is small coin, indeed.



### IN THIS ISSUE

Siyaves Azeri's "Consciousness as Objective Activity: A Historical–Genetic Approach" is both a novel statement and a guide to a massive literature, centered on the work of the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Whether or not it is indeed possible to "solve" the problem of consciousness by building upon this tradition — and Azeri also relates the work of Vygotsky, Pavlov, Leontief, Voloshinov and others to the U. S.–based symbolic interactionist school — this treatment of this most difficult of subjects repays careful reading, and reveals the abysmal ignorance of those who caricature the work of Marxist psychologists as reductionist, behaviorist, and so on. Treating consciousness as objective, and therefore social, activity is clearly central to addressing the long-standing philosophical conundra associated with it, and continuing engagement with the actual work of materialist psychology related to behavior, emotions, child development, language, and many other topics brings us closer to seeing how that centrality becomes manifest.

We present two Symposia in this issue. The first consists of a set of materials from a conference on Marx's *Grundrisse*, organized at the University of Bergamo, Italy, in 2008; the Introduction by Guest Editor Riccardo Belliofiore gives details. We may note that the most fruitful readings of the *Grundrisse* are ones that relate it to the end point of the chain of manuscripts reflecting the maturation of Marx's political economy: *Capital*. The contributions by Guido Starosta, Fred Moseley, and Geert Reuten & Peter Thomas all treat Marx's mature work as a historical product, perhaps following Hegel's aphorism that "the history of a thing is the thing itself." Their interpretations are sometimes surprising, and definitely challenging.

The second of the two Symposia consists of four reactions to David Laibman's review of Marcel van der Linden's *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (S&S, October 2009), plus Laibman's brief reply. These papers span a wide political spectrum, and invite two editorial comments. First, they show that the topic of the Soviet Union is very much alive; this is anything but antiquarian-

ism! Second, we appreciate the spirit of a search for convergence. One of the great tragedies of the 20th century was the division of the world left in 1917, and much depends on our ability going forward to maintain unity in the face of the inevitable — and profound — tensions that must accompany any experience in which social and political transformations based in working-class revolutionary movements take place — especially those involving state power. Capitalist ruling classes will ensure that conditions will never be ideal for this! Just how to maintain both solidarity and critical capacity is the open question on which our success depends. As always, we encourage readers to contribute to continuing discussion of this vital subject in our pages.

D. L.

#### ERRATUM

In “Editorial Perspectives” (*Science & Society*, October 2010, p. 458), with reference to the article by Jerry Harris, “The Center Cannot Hold: The Struggle for Reform in the Communist Party, 1957–58,” the name of Chicago-based Communist Party leader *Fred* Fine is incorrectly given as *Ben* Fine. We regret the error.