

MARXISM

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The history of the relationship between critical theory and Marxism has been an ambiguous one. On the one hand there have been those who have affirmed an axiomatic connection: i.e. Marxism as *the* critical theory of capitalist society. In this regard Marxism has tended to be viewed as a totalizing **discourse** under which all possible forms of social critique can be subsumed ('the problems of class, race, gender... all boil down to capitalist exploitation'). On the other hand, there are those who argue that critical theory represents an evolving (postmodern) intellectual tradition that, in rejecting all forms of naturalism and necessity, cannot be reconciled with Marxist thought and, moreover, renders the latter redundant.

Both positions are equally entrenched. For Jacques **Derrida** – regarded by many as the philosophical architect of contemporary critical theory – the boundary between Marxism and critical theory is considerably overdrawn. Indeed he maintains that his own highly influential theory of deconstruction is something that already names a deep connection with Marxist openings: 'Deconstruction has never had any sense or interest, in my view at least, except as a radicalization...in a certain *spirit of Marxism*' (Derrida 1994: 92).

Despite orthodox interpretation, Marxism has never comprised a unified position that simply needs to be explained in order to grasp its universal veracity and import.

Marxism is as much a part of history as any other discourse and as such continues to

undergo processes of innovation and change in order to deal with the limitations and inconsistencies that would be inevitable with any historical enterprise.

This chapter begins with an appraisal of some of the central innovations of Marx's thought and in particular the radical new emphasis he gave to the themes of context and power. From here it moves to a consideration of the **Frankfurt School** and their attempts to develop a context-based critical theory as a way of engaging with modern capitalism and its socio-cultural forms. It then addresses the type of discourse theory that has evolved precisely as a way of advancing a more integrated analysis of social reality. While this type of analysis is commonly associated with the post-structuralist perspectives of thinkers like Foucault and Derrida, it has also taken on an increasing importance in the Marxist and post-Marxist traditions through such theorists as Antonio Gramsci, Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Finally it explores certain aspects of the thought of Slavoj **Žižek** that, in some sense at least, marks a return to Karl **Marx**.

MARX

In the language of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999), we might say that the fundamental and enduring legacy of Marx consists in the fact that he told the truth about the lie of liberal capitalism. That is to say, the dominant view of the capitalist economy as a 'free market' – where individuals are deemed to be at liberty to make their own contracts and to sell their services to the highest bidder – was shown by Marx to be the great liberal myth of the modern age. Originating with the thought of

the Scottish political economist Adam Smith – and which is very much alive today in neo-liberal discourse concerning globalization – this myth affirms that the free market is the universal formula for achieving a rational, innovative and harmonious social order (indeed a New World Order).

What Marx demonstrated was that far from comprising an open and neutral environment the capitalist economy is first and foremost a *power structure*. The basis of this power structure is class oppression. For Marx capitalism is a mode of production that revolves around a basic antagonism between two fundamental classes: the bourgeoisie and the workers (or proletariat). As the minority ruling class, the bourgeoisie are defined by their monopolisation of the means of production and subsistence (i.e. all that is necessary to make a living: land, raw materials, technology and so on). The proletariat, by contrast, comprise the vast majority and are defined precisely in terms of their lack of access to the means of production. This is a condition that was created through a power process. By buying up the old feudal estates the emergent (industrial) bourgeois class proceeded to expel the people that lived there and to re-direct them to the new factories in the cities. In this way the latter were transformed from peasants – with at least some access to productive means (land, livestock and so on) – into workers without any such access and who consequently were *forced* to sell their services (their labour power) in exchange for a wage.

This wage, moreover, is only a fraction of the revenue generated by the workers' end product. Workers create 'surplus value' (by transforming raw materials into saleable commodities) for which they are not remunerated and which in turn becomes the very

source of profit for capitalists. Workers are paid far less than what they are truly owed. Capitalism is characterized by this systematic ‘theft’ of surplus value from the workers. Wage slavery becomes the new form of servitude.

Capitalism represents the highest stage of development and civilization – ‘it (capitalism) has accomplished wonders surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts and Gothic cathedrals’ (Marx & Engels, 1977: 111) – and yet its dynamic of change and progress is ultimately a restricted one. There are two main aspects here. The first is the tendency towards over-production. As emerging enterprises create more advanced, diverse and cheaper products then not only does this steadily reduce profit margins, it also begins to undermine the entire capitalist structure of property relations. An example of this would be the internet where all kinds of copyright material and products (texts, music, pharmaceuticals, software and so on) can be obtained freely or at much reduced prices. Faced with this type of threat, the typical response of trans-national corporations is to increase monopolisation by buying up the smaller enterprises and to actively stifle competition, innovation and development in order to protect markets and profits. So there is an inherent tension between the revolutionising drives within capitalism (technological advances etc.) and capitalism itself (a productive mode based on profit). Indeed the ‘old world’ problem of scarce resources and excessive demands is virtually reversed. Capitalism is a system that constantly over-produces and which seeks to manage the latter by artificially inducing (market) scarcity in order to maintain and inflate demand.

The second aspect concerns social organisation. As Marx emphasizes, the modern age is marked by an increasing tendency towards cosmopolitanism where everyone is in

principle entitled to participate in the markets of production and consumption regardless of social background. In this regard capitalism is something that repudiates all previous social relations of tradition and hierarchy ('all that is holy is profaned, all that is solid melts into air' – Marx & Engels, 1977: 111) but only insofar as it reinforces the basic relation of class exploitation itself. This social relation is what might be called the *necessary exception* and remains an inherent and unsurpassable limit for capitalism and its cosmopolitanizing influences.

The thematic contribution of Marx to critical theory can hardly be exaggerated. Against the classical models of economic abstraction derived from liberal thought, Marx sought to analyse socio-economic relations in terms of *social context*. And this perspective extends to the entire experience of identity itself. As he puts it, 'the human essence...is the ensemble of social relations' (Marx in Marx & Engels, 1977: 14). In other words, human identity is itself a product of history. It is not a pre-given entity – as in such terms as 'human nature', 'rational actor' and so forth – that accords naturalistically with capitalism. This is simply a convenient fiction of liberal thought.

Marx's central point is that the modern economy is a thoroughly human construction; the result of a concrete set of historical conditions. In contrast to the liberal promise of a social harmony produced by a free market, Marx shows that capitalism cannot resolve the fundamental social antagonism (class exploitation) on which it is based. Without this antagonism there would be no capitalism as such. This means that capitalism does not have a rational or objective Ground (as liberal orthodoxy maintains). Rather the *grounding* of capitalism – its consistency and stability – is something that is artificially generated and sustained through specific power relations.

And this idea of grounding – without ever reaching a final Ground – has become a keystone of contemporary philosophical thought. This is the main intuition that lies behind Derrida's theory of deconstruction.

At the same time there is also a tendency in Marx to fall back on a rather mechanistic account of human development and which renders some of his theoretical openings ambiguous and inconsistent. For example, despite stressing the importance of context in his social analysis Marx nevertheless maintains that there is an underlying and deterministic logic to history that can be conceptually grasped and which foretells of a final outcome. In this theory of historical materialism Marx argues that history itself will reach an ultimate resolution with the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the inauguration of a truly harmonious communism. Communism represents the supreme epoch of human existence where no further social transformation will take place (precisely because there are no antagonisms under communism to drive social change). Thus while his critique of *liberal* capitalist utopia is a compelling one, he does not manage to get beyond utopianism as such. In this regard Marx remains very much within the grip of idealist Enlightenment philosophy and the myth of a reachable Ground.

Similarly, Marx maintains in various texts that workers have *objective interests* in communism and which means that they will inevitably rise up against their capitalist overlords. But if the orientation of the human being depends upon the 'ensemble of social relations' then is there any guarantee that this will happen? The Czech Marxist Kautsky, for example, was to observe that by the early twentieth century workers were far more interested in trades unionism and social democratic (party) politics than

revolutionary communism. This has led writers like Lichtheim (1974) to argue that Marx's view of inevitable revolution really only held credibility under the conditions of nineteenth century capitalism. As these conditions have been transformed through social reform/welfarism (not least as a result of trade union activity and social democratic politics) then this view is neither relevant nor likely.

Yet such tensions in Marx's thought have not led to stagnation or obsolescence. Rather they have been the source of an ongoing history of creative intellectual development in which, in general terms, Marxism has come to be viewed less as an objectivist science and more as a mobilizing force and/or ideology within the social imagination. As well as opening up alternative avenues of enquiry, new perspectives have been developed that have attempted to incorporate a far greater sense of context and historicity in theoretical endeavour and application. It is to these perspectives that we shall now turn.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

CAPITALISM AND ALL THAT JAZZ

The term critical theory was first coined by the Frankfurt School. Founded in 1923, the School – organized formally as the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt – was essentially a Marxist think-tank that comprised some of the most influential thinkers of the time: Max **Horkheimer** (who took up the directorship of the Institute in 1930); Walter **Benjamin**; Theodor **Adorno**; Herbert **Marcuse** and

Erich Fromm, among others. Having moved to Geneva during the Second World War, the School returned to Frankfurt in 1950 with a view to analyzing systematically the central features of contemporary capitalist society.

The Frankfurt School can be seen as a reaction to the type of classical, or 'scientific', Marxism that had been developed by the Second International under the leadership of Friedrich **Engels**. For the latter, Marxist theory had already determined what the underlying laws of historical development were and hence it was essentially a question of waiting for these laws to manifest their full revolutionary effects – the collapse of capitalism was simply a matter of time. This led to a passive conception of politics and a tragic policy of political inaction in the face of early European fascism.

Against this type of intellectual aloofness, the Frankfurt School affirmed that theory should be grounded in social reality. The Left could not afford to wait for the world to conform to an abstract model of development (i.e. historical materialism) but had to begin to think on its feet and to develop the theoretical tools and concepts for practical and contemporaneous forms of political intervention.

In his seminal work, *Critical Theory* (1998), Horkheimer argued that critical theory should not be thought of as a detached rationalistic appraisal of the 'concrete historical situation' but as something that acts as a 'force within (that situation) to stimulate change' (Horkheimer 1998: 206). What gives this type of theoretical endeavour its critical edge is precisely this aspect of reflexive engagement with the world and in such a way that the latter might be transformed progressively.

Against this background the School was concerned to initiate a new type of approach along three main lines of intellectual development: (i) a fundamental emphasis on historical context rather than abstract theory; (ii) a systematic engagement with the cultural forms that contemporary capitalism was giving rise to; (iii) an analysis of the new types of social subjectivity that were being engendered as a result of these cultural forms.

A central assertion was that capitalist society was moving to a new level of ideological sophistication through what Horkheimer called the ‘**culture industry**’. Culture had replaced religion as the new ‘opium of the masses’ in framing a subtle order of conformism. According to Benjamin the emerging context was one in which the possibility of independent art forms was becoming more and more compromised by an ever expanding mass culture whose basic tendency is towards the banal and mediocre. And this tendency is insidiously political. Not only are cultural enterprises and artefacts increasingly managed and produced on a mass scale for consumption purposes but, at a deeper level, they feed into a self-perpetuating milieu of docility. Mainstream theatre, radio, television, internet and so on, can be seen to be already in the service of a certain pacifying bourgeois culture. Indeed all such media may be said to be at its *most ideological* precisely when it aspires to this idea of neutral entertainment: that is to say, when it implicitly accepts and, consequently, *naturalizes* the power configuration of the capitalist status quo - thereby displacing and eviscerating all sense of critique and critical energy.

This is reflected further in Adorno’s famous statement that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz was barbaric’ (Adorno, 1983: 34). Thus what is truly barbaric is the kind

of cultural practice that leads to an active forgetting and/or ignoring of human atrocities and the very socio-economic system that underpins such atrocities. It is a critique that in today's world would point to the way in which people tend to be more exercised about the outcome of the various versions of *Big Brother*, *X-Factor* and so on, than the appalling suffering and abjection on a global scale.

The School especially targeted the cultural reflexivity of contemporary capitalism. In this context, the musical mode of jazz was seen as a paradigmatic expression of the latter. On the surface jazz appears to be the very embodiment of spontaneity, innovation and improvisation. In reality, however, all such improvisation is ultimately fake: it is always structured around certain musical motifs that govern its rhythms and repetitions and which, in turn, are circumscribed by harmonious resolution; it is always so many *variations* on a theme.

In a similar way, capitalism is a system that seemingly allows for all kinds of individual expression and innovation but only to the extent that it creates a kind of monotheistic attachment to the system itself. It creates a conformism through diversity (an *e pluribus unum*) in which more and more forms of individualistic 'improvisation' are accommodated on the basis of an underlying collectivist consumer culture. The apparent freedom that is won under late capitalism is finally 'freedom to be the same' (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 136). While 'we' (as in the West) seek to personalise our computers/mobile phones through a thousand different styles, ring-tones and screensavers, this only serves to underline the fact that we are all 'wired'; plugged in to a basic profit-making matrix. This affects the very forms of 'individuality':

Existence in late capitalism is a permanent rite of initiation... Individuals are tolerated only as far as their wholehearted identity with the universal is beyond question. From the standardized improvisation in jazz to the original film personality who must have a lock of hair straying over her eyes so that she can be recognised as such, pseudoindividuality reigns.

(Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 124-25)

Reflected in today's rather comical image of middle-class youth adopting the language and gestures of the gangsta rap and hip hop movements, the modes of individuality are increasingly managed and packaged through the culture industry. In this sense, the modern conjuncture is even more tragic than Marx anticipated.

Whereas Marx identified the essential condition of capitalism as one of enforced servitude (wage slavery), the Frankfurt School alluded to something even more insidious: a willingness in people to inscribe themselves within the very system that oppresses them; to defer to the widespread mythology of those who have 'made it': the rags-to-riches millionaire, the lottery winner, the pop/sports idols and so on.

Contemporary subjectivity is thus one of perverse *collaboration*. As in the phenomenon of Stockholm syndrome – where hostages identify with their terrorist captors as a desperate survival strategy ('if I am accepted within the group then I won't be victimized/eliminated') – late capitalism is a kind of Stockholm syndrome writ large; a skewed, and rather desperate, faith in our own socio-economic betrayal.

POLITICAL CULTURE AND RESISTANCE

A central objective of the Frankfurt School was to find ways of resisting and indeed breaking out of the cultural manipulations of late capitalism. On these grounds what Benjamin admired about the German poet and playwright, Brecht, was not only his development of political critique through art but his demonstration that art itself is a political venture: an enterprise whose ultimate responsibility is to something **Other**; to critique itself.

For Brecht, bourgeois culture attempts to dissipate our creative potential for critique and contestation and, more widely, to repress any awareness that reality is a political, not a given, construction. It is a culture that reduces its audience to the status of mere spectator and which presents the existing power structure as a naturalistic backdrop of reality against which various sentimentalist dramas are played out. Brecht, by contrast, is someone who avoids any easy dramatic solutions or reconciliations. His task is to de-stabilize the audience/auteur relationship and to show that our capacity for achieving freedom is something that (in an almost Rousseauian sense) has to be won through active participation.

Adorno developed a similar argument in respect of the musical styles of Stravinsky and Schoenberg. For Adorno, Stravinsky's compositions may be characterized as the mood music for contemporary capitalism: homophonic string-based melodies; a kind of early muzac that stupefies. Schoenberg's music, by contrast, refuses the conventional harmonious resolution in favour of an 'atonal' kind of musical

expression. Yet Schoenberg's approach is far from random. In his development of the twelve-tone serial (one that prohibits any repetition of notes until the eleventh note has been played) Schoenberg develops a system of musical expression that is uncompromising in its organization.

Implicit in Schoenberg is a displacement of the traditional music/noise distinction. Music is not a naturalistic construction or a pre-given form (the 'music of the spheres' etc.) that can be simply counterposed to 'noise'. Rather it comprises an undecidable terrain of diverse conventions and ordering principles that allows for phonic developments along incommensurably different lines. What we have with Schoenberg is not only the music but a representation of the contingency of the ordering of musicality as such – a kind of anti-muzac that cuts against the musical grain.

Thus the importance of such figures as Brecht and Schoenberg was seen to derive from their ability to act as exemplars of resistance against the dominant forms of bourgeois culture. In this way new possibilities for *politicizing* culture can be opened up with a view to developing radical and innovative opposition to the bourgeois paradigm. Through higher and more autonomous forms of artistic endeavour the idea was that people would be shaken from the culturally-induced stupor that reinforces the view that capitalism comprises the naturalistic horizon of reality itself. On this reading, the School can be seen as re-conceptualizing culture as an undecidable terrain of contestation in which different types of (passive/active) consciousness and subjectivity can be constructed and which, in principle, allows for the mobilization of political resistance. Culture – and more especially 'high culture' (as opposed to

mass/popular culture) - can become a fulcrum for effecting progressive transformation.

The legacy of the Frankfurt School has developed in two main and divergent ways. The first of these reflects an optimistic belief in the power of high culture to oppose and transcend the superficial materialism of the bourgeois ethos. Echoes of this approach can be found in the thought of Jürgen **Habermas** who exhibits a kind of Enlightenment-based faith in the civilizing influence of what he calls ‘communicative rationality’ and its perceived capacity for overcoming ideological distortion and social conflict. In general this type of approach has been criticized for being elitist in its views concerning a ‘higher’ culture and rationality and, at the same time, somewhat patronizing and naïve.

The second is more sceptical and pessimistic. Here the very strength of the School’s interventions has arguably become a major weakness. In stressing the extent of interconnectedness between culture and the economy in an overall configuration there has been a strong tendency in Marxist thought – and especially Marxist structuralism - to endow that configuration with an absolute centre: the functionalist logic of capital. With thinkers like Louis Althusser and Frederic Jameson, for example, capitalism is generally affirmed as a totalizing structure that draws all the elements of socio-cultural life (‘high’ and ‘low’) together under its instrumentalist rationality. In consequence the popular classes become thoroughly incorporated into the capitalist system. Yet if social identity is subject to such a degree of structuralist closure then how can any form of political resistance ever arise? In effect we would seem to be presented with a simple inversion of Marx’s position: instead of being pre-

programmed to overthrow capitalism, the masses are doomed to conformist subordination within it. The Castor of determinism has been substituted for the Pollux of fatalism. This is precisely the world of Marcuse's 'one-dimensional man' (Marcuse, 2002) where human life is reduced to a kind of consumerist puppetry. It is a world eerily encapsulated in Georg Romero's masterpiece, *Dawn of the Dead*, in which the zombies – obsessively patrolling a shopping mall – are constantly drawn towards a promise of life through the empty gestures of retail therapy.

POST-MARXISM AND DISCOURSE THEORY

Although pre-dating the Frankfurt School, the thought of the Italian Marxist, Antonio **Gramsci**, may be said to mark a crucial break with the former. For Gramsci **modern** society is not a closed totality organised around a fixed centre of capitalist rationality. He does not reduce socio-cultural practices to the economic (or *vice versa*). Society is viewed rather as a field of contestation in which different elements are combined to form a specific construction; what he calls an historical bloc. In a highly radical move, Gramsci extends this type of analysis to the question of objectivity itself:

It might seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity. But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of 'standpoint of the cosmos itself' and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God... Objective always means 'humanly objective' which can be held to correspond exactly to 'historically subjective': in other words, objective would mean 'universal subjective'. Man knows

objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race
historically unified in a single unitary cultural system.

(Gramsci 2003: 445)

The objective world, and our subjective inscription within it, is something that is *made* and not given to us in metaphysical terms. Similarly there exists no Identity – either as a positive essence or as a closed structural form - beyond the historical processes of identification themselves. The orientation of the worker, for example, is not pre-ordained but depends upon social configuration within a given social context. While the view of the proletarian masses as avenging agents of social revolution is excessively optimistic, the pessimistic Frankfurt School view of the masses as docile Stepford workers is equally extreme. Gramsci rejects *both* determinism and fatalism and shows identification to be a historico-political matter without any final resolution.

In the development of an alternative post-Marxist tradition writers like Hall and Laclau and Mouffe have sought to combine the insights of Gramsci with a range of ‘continental’ philosophical currents: Foucault’s genealogical method, Lacan’s analysis of the signifier, Wittgenstein’s development of the notion of language games as well as Derridean deconstruction. This emerging tradition is one that gives a new centrality to an expanded conception of discourse.

Discourse theory adopts a realist position in that it affirms the existence of a material world external to thought – this is its starting point. What it rejects, however, is the traditional idealist notion that that world can be described in an unmediated and direct sense – as if from a ‘God’s eye’ point of view. On the contrary, we always have to

interpret the world through discourses: i.e. specific configurations, or systems, of meaning. Discourse is not limited to the purely linguistic but applies equally to action and our physical engagement with the world in general. For example, the physical act of dining in a restaurant is one that simultaneously involves the interpretation of signs, the use of speech/gestures, the observation of social protocol and so on, as part of an entire meaningful process. Such a process – the structured integration of linguistic and non-linguistic practices – is an instance of discourse.

For discourse theory there exists a fundamental and irresolvable gap between the external world of objects and the way we interpret that world. This means that, in contrast to Enlightenment philosophy and today's followers of Habermas, it is impossible to transcend all discursive contexts and stand in the cold light of Reason; it is impossible to penetrate through to any 'extra-discursive' realm of positivistic Truth. Put simply, nothing can be interpreted beyond interpretation itself – there is no final description of the world as it 'actually is'. Objects, practices and events can only be apprehended through the assignment of meaning, and this assignment is neither fixed nor neutral but always takes place within a historical framework. As Derrida puts it, 'there are only contexts without any absolute centre or anchorage' (1988: 12).

In this sense we might say that discourse designates an ongoing series of historical attempts to give form to what is essentially formless. While discourses seek to (relatively) stabilize meaning, no discourse can establish a total closure or fully determine the nature of an object. A specific wooden structure, for example, can be a 'table', a 'desk', an 'altar', a 'public platform' and so on, without being *essentially* any one of these: its meaning depends on how it is *articulated* with other objects,

rituals, social practices and so on, in a discursive context. There are two central points here. First, there is nothing in the object itself that can stabilize its meaning in an absolute ('extra-discursive') sense. Second, and consequently, the meaning of any object can always be subverted and articulated in a radically different way. We are confronted, in other words, with an eternal politics of meaning and identity.

If we take the idea of 'womanhood' we can see how its construction within the terms of Victorian discourse is radically different to what it is today. What allows for feminist subversion is not any positive feminine essence but precisely the lack of any essence: the persistence of a basic negativity. In this sense we can say that feminist subversion not only reflects the failure of Victorian discourse to naturalize the meaning of gender but effectively the failure of *all* attempts to naturalize such meaning...including that of feminism. Feminism does not come any closer to what womanhood *really* is. Feminism too is an artificial construction – something that has to be reproduced and defended through institutional arrangements – and can lead in a variety of different discursive directions: conservative feminism, left feminism, post-feminism and so on. This type of approach has been developed extensively by Hall (and others) in respect of ethnicity, nationhood and a whole range of cultural identities.

Does this mean that everything is in a constant state of liquidity where meanings change from one moment to the next? Evidently not. People can and do identify with all kinds of positions – the Biblical account of the universe, political conspiracies, for and against genetic manipulation, pro-/anti- globalisation etc. – and produce all kinds of material to support their claims. But whether these achieve wider *credibility* is

entirely another matter. And credibility is not the result of any naturalism or imperial measure but is always a human-contextual matter where interpretive collectives – scientists, academics, judges, journalists, policy-makers... -- broadly establish the nature of ‘evidence’, ‘coherence’, ‘best practice’ and so on. Such categories depend for their constitution on the specific discursive formation in question and the success of the latter depends, in turn, on its ability to exclude/repress other possible formations. What ‘grounds’ a formation is not any supra-historical Ground but precisely the dimensions of repression and exclusion that structure its intelligibility.

This is the meaning of Laclau and Mouffe’s assertion that ‘antagonism constitutes the limits of every objectivity’ (Laclau and Mouffe, 2001: 125). That is to say, objectivity is something that has to be circumscribed – as a field of (relatively) stable meanings – against that which would overwhelm/negate it. In other words, objectivity depends upon frontiers of exclusion that in providing the sense of limits are simultaneously constitutive and affirming of a specific discursive formation of objectivity.

Objectivity is a (historical) power construction that is always partial and provisional and which is essentially prone to further subversion and re-configuration – just as the gendered objectivity of Victorian socio-sexual life has been subverted and re-configured.

Foundationalism is consequently turned on its head. Objectivity cannot be identified in positivistic terms but is shown to grow out of negativity and antagonistic repression. The question is no longer the idealist one of *what* is objectivity (what is its intrinsic nature etc.) but rather *how* is it constituted? For discourse theorists the answer lies with the historical positioning of the frontiers of exclusion. In this sense

all objectivity may be said to reflect the eternal attempt to ground historically what is epistemologically ungroundable.

It is on this basis that Laclau and Mouffe advance their impossibility-of Society thesis. A fully integrated Society is impossible precisely because it too is founded on frontiers of exclusion. The consistency of any (historical) society relies upon some kind of boundary that is established between belonging and non-belonging; between the registers of 'us' and 'them'. While the nature and positioning of such a boundary is historical, its presence is a transhistorical and constitutive necessity for social organization as such. All social formations are *essentially* unstable because their positive consistency depends upon the exclusion of a 'surplus' negativity (Otherness) which can never be fully mastered or resolved.

ŽIŽEK

RETURN TO MARX

Insofar as all ideology presents some kind of achievable utopianist dream then, by definition, it may be said to exist in a state of denial as regards the impossibility of Society. But if this is the case how does ideology deal with the fact that it cannot deliver the utopian object? It is in this context that the influential Slovenian philosopher, Slavoj **Žižek**, has developed a compelling perspective that, in a certain sense, represents a return to Marx. For Žižek, ideology does not simply deny impossibility but re-stages our encounter with the latter in such a way that it appears resolvable. That is to say, ideology attempts to disguise impossibility and to re-

interpret it as if it were a potentially removable obstacle. Žižek takes as an example of this the ideological role played by ‘the Jew’ in Nazi discourse:

Society is not prevented from achieving its full identity because of Jews: it is prevented by its own antagonistic nature, by its own immanent blockage, and it ‘projects’ this internal negativity into the figure of the ‘Jew’.

(Žižek, 1989: 127)

Through ideological fantasy impossibility is re-staged as a crime of theft/sabotage that must be prosecuted. The ‘Jew’ functions as an embodiment of negativity (the negation of Society) and, in so doing, serves to support the very fantasy of an achievable (Aryan) utopia. By equating impossibility with an historical Other (‘Jews’, ‘Palestinians’, ‘Gypsies’, ‘Muslims’...) ideology seeks to create precisely this type of illusion of an ultimate resolution.

It is this notion of embodied negativity that is at the heart of Laclau and Žižek’s dispute over the notion of class (see Butler *et al*, 2000). Laclau makes two compelling points: (i) the industrial working class, which in the days of the early Marxists exhibited a certain socio-cultural homogeneity, has become increasingly fragmented due to socio-economic transformations; (ii) the political orientation of class is not pre-given (it can be progressive and/or reactionary) and, in consequence, cannot function as the natural leader or sovereign co-ordinator for all social struggle.

Žižek, by contrast, wants to keep the notion of class but not in straightforward terms. His perspective is concerned less with the analytical status of class (that Laclau

rightly criticizes) than with the *locus* of class: that is, with the position of the radically excluded: the world's destitute, displaced and outcast. These excluded and radically impoverished groups function as today's symptoms: i.e. as constitutive of, and yet debarred from, the development of global (i.e. Western) capitalism. In this broader sense, class is not a positive identity but rather the opposite: a signifier of embodied negativity. Class becomes the name (or one of the names) for the basic failure/impossibility of capitalism to constitute itself as a universal cosmopolitan system (see, Žižek and Daly, 2004). On these rather different grounds, Žižek nonetheless affirms Marx's fundamental insight that capitalism cannot function without the type of systematic exclusion that is embodied in this way.

Here Žižek develops a different slant on the question of impossibility. For Žižek the key issue is not so much the impossibility of Society but the socialization of impossibility: that is to say, how is impossibility situated in defining the limits of the possible in concrete terms? Impossibility should not be regarded as merely a neutral category but as something that social ideology engages with reflexively.

Contemporary political culture, for example, tends to be dominated by an ethos of irony where demands for radical transformation are treated with cynical suspicion. To this effect, political engagement is already limited by its own sense of limitation and impossibility as such.

When Western leaders speak of a New World Order, for example, this is always in terms of an expansion *within* the terms of existing liberal capitalist principles: i.e. a development in which the latter remain firmly in place. However, a truly alternative global order – one that would involve a radical re-organization of power relations in

egalitarian terms – is consigned to the sphere of the whimsical (‘a noble idea but human nature dictates that this is impossible...’). The limits of the liberal capitalist conjuncture thus delineate a naturalistic horizon that defines the realm of the possible against what is deemed impossible.

In connection with the Frankfurt School and more lately the work of Jameson (1992), Žižek is concerned to analyse today’s capitalist reality as a socio-cultural whole. In this regard he detects a certain complicity between the type of contemporary postmodern culture that is frequently endorsed in discourse theory and the logic of capital. There are two main aspects here. First the ongoing pluralisation of identities is one that provides more and more opportunities for commodification and consumption. Even so-called ethical consumption provides market opportunities for organic food, green products and so on. Second, and perhaps more insidiously, the postmodern emphasis on difference is one that tends to assume a kind of level playing field – all identities must be respected, considered equally without prioritizing one type of identity or social struggle over another. The effect of this, however, is to render real poverty, global hunger and social exclusion virtually invisible and/or abstract (such things happen ‘elsewhere’). Thus what is overlooked is precisely this dimension of the necessary exception vis-à-vis the culture, or economy, of differences. Just as slavery showed the symptomatic truth (the embodied negativity) of Athenian democracy as a tyranny of citizens, so too today’s abject multitude discloses the truth of postmodern capitalism as a tyranny of differences: a global differential inclusiveness that in order to function relies upon even deeper trenches of exclusion. The (negativized) truth of our cosmopolitan world is the figure of the displaced migrant whose minimal demands are viewed as somehow costing the Earth:

threatening social cohesion ('our way of life'), draining national resources, spreading disease, crime, prostitution and so on.

What Žižek affirms, by contrast, is a politics of the act. The act (which is derived from Lacan) refers to a radical break with an existing pattern of social existence and in such a way that it opens up new possibilities for reconfiguring that social existence. This type of politics is one that engages directly with impossibility as it is historically situated in circumscribing the realm of the possible. In other words, it takes on the impossible not in terms of 'the impossible *to* happen' but rather 'the impossible *that* happened' (Žižek, in Butler, 2005: 145). The revolutionaries of eighteenth-century France, for example, may be said to have achieved the impossible by breaking out of the politico-cultural matrix of the enduring pre-modern world and reconfiguring social existence along radically new and secular lines. In seeking to break out of the matrix of the possible (what is considered 'natural', 'common-sense', the 'way it is' etc.) a politics of the act may also be considered as a politics of impossibility.

In order to break out of the global-liberal-capitalist matrix of possibility, Žižek argues that we need to stand with today's symptoms – the negated classes - against the type of postmodernism that puts its faith in more and more forms of differential absorption. And this implies a rejection of the postmodern prohibition regarding political prioritization (that we should not elevate certain social struggles over others). For Žižek it is vital that we prioritize systemic abjection precisely in its status as necessary exception; as something that, as Marx knew well, holds up the mirror to contemporary globalization and its fake cosmopolitanism.

In traditional Marxist discourse critical theory was generally seen in terms of establishing an objective fulcrum that would enable rational and emancipatory social change. The history of Marxist intellectual development, however, has seen a gradual abandonment of this type of ambition. From the Frankfurt School through to Gramsci and contemporary post-Marxism, the idea of theoretically determining an *external* principle for social transformation has steadily given way to a basic emphasis on context and historicity.

Does this mean consequently that critical theory no longer has a critical edge or any sort of purchase on an alternative normative vision? The postmodernist liberal philosopher, Richard **Rorty**, would answer this in the affirmative. For him the ultimate achievement of contemporary critical theory is, in a way, its own dissolution. That is to say, what critical theory serves to demonstrate is that there is no theoretical basis for radical collective emancipation. Indeed the very emphasis on the differential contingency of all Being is something that, according to Rorty, gives implicit endorsement to a liberal ideal; one in which individuals *qua* individuals are free to pursue their personal goals and ideals about how to live (Rorty, 1989 and 1991).

Yet post-Marxists would reject the idea of any kind of naturalistic fit here (such an idea would itself be regarded as somewhat metaphysical). Rather the emphasis on contingency and discursivity is viewed precisely as a *stimulus* for imagining social possibilities beyond what currently exists. In this way figures such as Hall, Laclau and

Mouffe have tended to stress the importance of alliances between disaffected groups with a view to advancing progressive forms of subversion along the lines of a deeper and more expansive democratic culture.

Žižek, however, argues that democratic subversion is not enough as it already defers too much to the ‘grammar’ of contemporary political encounter. We should not play by the conventional postmodernist rules of emphasizing difference and pluralisation within the existing social horizon. For Žižek there needs to be a more elementary break with the today’s matrix of identitarian politics. Insofar as the developing New World Order is a human power construction then we are all implicated in both its functioning and the way it produces poverty, hunger and abjection as an inherent set of symptoms. On these grounds, our ethical responsibility to the excluded classes becomes the source of a new type of resistance – a mobilizing identification with the negated outcast – and a politics of action that seeks to break out of the very circumscribed order of possibility that relies on and reproduces such symptoms.

This brings us full circle to the analysis of Marx and his vision of an International (a political movement without regional boundaries) that is capable of taking on the capitalist system. Yet, in contrast to Marx, the content of such an International would not be fixed or pre-given. For Žižek, as indeed for Derrida, such an International would be defined by its constituencies of exclusion and by an un placatable spirit of politico-ethical involvement and responsibility. It would be an International that constantly strives to remind us that we cannot hide behind terms like ‘globalisation’, ‘market reality’, ‘regional stability’, ‘national interest’ and so on, as if they described a neutral order of social existence. And it is surely in this sense that a

characteristically Marxist critical theory will continue to find its critical edge: in the radical indictment that we have no alibis.

FURTHER READING

Derrida, Jacques (1994) *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge.

A crucial text by Derrida that revivifies the work Marx and which, through a series of encounters with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, develops an inspired deconstructive critique of the modern condition.

Horkheimer, Max and Adorno, Theodor W. (2002), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Stanford: Stanford University Press.

This is a major text by two key figures of the Frankfurt School. Among its highlights it introduces the reader to their highly influential 'culture industry thesis'.

Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (1987) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London: Verso.

A difficult but rewarding work that reformulates the Marxist problematic in the context of a new emphasis on discourse and a thoroughgoing critique of essentialism. The recent edition also boasts a new preface that helps to clarify the authors' political perspective.

Žižek and Daly (2004), *Conversations with Žižek* – A wide-ranging text that introduces the reader to some of the main arguments and ideas from one of the most influential thinkers of our age.

Butler, J. *et al* (2000), *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* – This is a collection of intriguing polemical exchanges between three major philosophical figures - Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek – who represent important, and contrasting, intellectual traditions.

Bibliography addendum

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