

Notes/ Errata / Autocritique on *Anticapitalism and Culture*

At the time of writing I've seen a couple of reviews of the book. I'm not going to try to respond to them: they both say nice things that I agree with, nasty things that I don't agree with (and in a couple of cases I think are demonstrably unfair or just plain inaccurate), and nasty things that I think are fair. There isn't much to be gained by addressing anything but the latter, so I will say that the criticism that the book doesn't really have anything to say either about the role of war in the global neoliberal regime or about anti-war movements recently or in the more distant past is quite clearly accurate. I don't have anything else to say about it, really.

Here is my own major criticism of the book. When I was reading the proofs, I found myself asking myself 'what is this 'Marxism' that keeps being referred to?' Marx himself, and the Marxian critique of capital, are clearly fundamental to key elements of the book's arguments. So whence the need to define my position as 'post-Marxist? When it comes down to it, are there any thinkers who actually exhibit the 'Marxist' commitment to a thought of 'totality' which I spend so much energy criticising? Or is it just Lukacs and Debord (the Parisian Lukacs)?

What I don't make clear in the book is that for me, for a long time, the idea of a certain 'post-Marxism' which *includes Marx himself as one of its most important resources* has been crucial (arguably this isn't a million miles away from the position taken by Terrell Carver, which might explain why he was so dismissive of the theoretical sections of my book, which don't mention his work at all...). We can always cite that famous quip by Marx that he himself was 'no Marxist', in response to a report of some highly deterministic 'Marxist' account of something-or-other in his later years. More importantly, I only realised quite recently that this had become an ingrained habit with me because of my own formative political experiences, but that most readers of the book

probably wouldn't share those experiences. When I was in my teens and early twenties, in the late 80s and early 90s, it was generally the case in the UK that in political contexts (although not in academic ones), to call oneself 'a Marxist' was to invite the assumption that one belonged to a Trotskyist organisation, adhering to the Leninist doctrines of the vanguard party and democratic centralism, and to the Trotskyist espousal of class purism (such that any form of coalition politics was condemned as 'crossing class lines' or 'popular-frontism', while radicals from anarchist, green, liberal or social-democratic traditions were simply loathed and despised). It should be fairly obvious why one would wish to distance oneself from such a position, and this is a habit that I have never really dropped.

At an intellectual level, the key reason why I call myself a 'post-Marxist' rather a 'Marxist' is that I simply don't wish to get involved with the kind of exegetical wrangling that starts up as soon as one has to worry about whether or not a particular theory, idea or doctrine is or is not properly 'Marxist'. For me, the designation 'post-Marxist' does not imply a *rejection* of Marx, but a rejection of the idea that there is only one correct interpretation of Marx at either an analytical or organisational level. However, another key distinction that I make in the book rests on the issue of the concept of 'totality', which I reject and characterise as typical of any 'Marxist' point of view. I think that this characterisation might be accurate with regard to *some* versions of 'Marxism', but I think now that it's based on a rather caricatured and simplistic understanding of the ways in which the term 'totality' is used in a range of contexts. Perhaps the term 'totality' doesn't necessarily have to designate an absolutely transparent, exhaustive, wholly and permanently knowable set of social relations so much as any ensemble thereof whose mutual identity or consistency is somehow dependent upon their mutual relations. It might well be possible to understand particular sets of social relations as 'totalities' from a point of view which is itself particular, contingent and temporary (like the patterns which momentarily form while turning a kaleidoscope, perhaps): one

could probably make use of the Deleuzian notion of ‘plane of consistency’ here, but developing that idea properly would take a whole book.

One further thing I would say about this issue is that arguably the term ‘hegemony’ does much the same work for me and some of the people by whom I’ve been most influenced as the word ‘totality’ does for some other theorists. ‘Hegemony’ designates a set of organising relations between different elements of an ensemble or assemblage (and one could even say ‘of a totality’) which might be, from my perspective, highly contingent and very much temporary (even, perhaps, momentary). Now, critics of the concept of ‘hegemony’ often criticise it for what they see as its assumption of a clearly bounded and defined totality of social relations. As should be clear, I don’t think that this is necessarily implied by the concept of ‘hegemony’ at all, and Laclau & Mouffe’s key theoretical move was arguably to detach the notion of hegemony from any such clearly bound and finite notion of the social. However, it’s hard to ignore the parallels between this critique of ‘hegemony’ and my critique of ‘totality’, which raises the question for me of whether the same defence of ‘totality’ could not be made as I have made of ‘hegemony’. On the one hand, I could still make a good case that ‘hegemony’ is a better term, because (with its origins in a concept of *leadership*) it implies something processual and dynamic, whereas ‘totality’ arguably implies something static; but on the other hand, one would have to ask if anyone in the Marxist or any other tradition really ever has been so naive as to think that social relations could be viewed as a finite and determinable whole from some omniscient ‘scientific’ perspective. There’s a whole argument to be made that the *implied* assumption that they could has had disastrous political implications at times (for example, encouraging the labour movement to ignore issues of race and gender in the assumption that to understand class relations was to understand the full totality of power relations obtaining in modern societies), but that’s not to say that anyone who’s really thought about it has ever been silly enough to make this assumption. So overall I think I would have to say that the anti-totality rhetoric of some of the book should at least be problematised...

The final point I would make for now is that I think that the book is still - despite its qualifications in the other direction - rather too critical of Hardt & Negri. I increasingly think that their contribution is more useful and important than most people influenced by my influences seem to think. I do feel that that the sniping between them and Laclau & Mouffe is rather depressing (and yes, they started it - and Negri's reading of Laclau is just bafflingly inaccurate: see the references in the excellent new book co-authored with Cesare Casarino, *In Praise of the Common*), and has obscured a potentially interesting dialogue (although I would continue to maintain that important ways, there are more affinities between Laclau & Mouffe and Deleuze & Guattari than between Hardy & Negri and either).