

Raw-onion sandwich

Signs of the Times, Critical Politics Conference,
30 October 1999, London School of Economics

In his *History of the World in 10½ Chapters* Julian Barnes remarks that to say that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce, makes it sound too grand and considered a process. History just burps, he says, and we taste the raw-onion sandwich it swallowed centuries ago.

The opening speaker on behalf of Signs of the Times declared that in the summer of 1997 the organization began a lengthy discussion of Marx's work in the context of a new global capitalism and, more domestically, a landslide victory by a Labour Party seemingly intent on advancing the neo-liberal project inherited from the Conservatives. For Signs of the Times to discuss the relevance of Marx in today's world certainly has a touch of farce about it. The organization was founded from the fallout of *Marxism Today*. That magazine spent its last few years elaborating the idea that we are living in 'New Times'. The central themes of these new times – globalization, a new modernity, the collapse of socialism and the Left – facilitated *Marxism Today*'s shift from Marxism through post-Marxism to anti-Marxism, resulting in a 'liberal progressivism' which became the defining characteristic of the work produced by Signs of the Times, dominated Left-liberal intellectual culture in the 1990s, and fed into what became the new Labour project. Part of the underlying ideological rationale of the *Marxism Today*–New Times–Signs of the Times–New Labour nexus was an attempt to bring an end to Marxist class analysis on the Left. To witness the organization consider in public the possible relevance of Marx, the debilitating effects of intensified capital accumulation, and the problems posed by a hegemonic liberalism, therefore left the air heavy with the smell of decade-old raw onion.

Yet this also presented the conference with what was its central tension and only interesting question. The tension was focused on the debilitating effects of an ever more hegemonic neo-liberalism, which now appears so dominant that it has appropriated key socialist ideas which were once used as principles of collective resistance. The question emerged in the closing plenary, the highlight and most revealing moment of the day. This was whether anti-capitalism has to remain the central organizing principle for radical politics. The fact that most talk of the future had been couched in such terms as 'an alternative modernity' and 'living differently' suggests that for many speakers the question was null and void – if one can 'live differently' within capitalism then why would one be against it? But Robert Brenner chose to answer the question with a detailed account of the shifting political economy of capital over the last thirty years. He pointed out that real wages are the same level now as in 1969, that in 1998 the wages of the bottom 80 per cent of the workforce were lower than the wages of the bottom 80 per cent of the workforce in 1989, that US poverty levels are higher now than in 1979, and so on. Brenner's paper was at once breathtaking and a breath of fresh air. It answered the question of the plenary with a range of other, more pertinent questions, such as why on earth would you want to give up on an anti-capitalist politics? How on earth could you even think of doing so?

Lukács once castigated the German intelligentsia for having taken up residence in the Grand Hotel Abyss, a beautiful hotel with all the comforts, allowing for daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals and entertainments. Signs of the Times seem to have had a long stay in the hotel, fallen in love with it, bought it, and turned it into a cheap B&B. With flaking paintwork, empty rooms and raw-onion sandwich the only meal on the menu, it is one to avoid.

Mark Neocleous

After-dinner mints

UK Kant Society Annual Conference,
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P.F. Strawson occupies a special place in the history of postwar analytic philosophy. In *Individuals* (1959), Strawson sought to make metaphysics respectable again, after the opprobrium heaped upon it by the logical positivists and the indifference affected by the practitioners of Oxford conceptual analysis. Strawson's other great contribution was to stimulate a new interest in Kant among philosophers in the analytic tradition. In *Individuals* he had used transcendental arguments of explicitly Kantian descent to establish that the basic or fundamental particulars of our conceptual scheme are material bodies and persons. In *The Bounds of Sense* (1966) Strawson undertook to isolate the philosophical core of Kant's first *Critique*, detaching a descriptive metaphysics of experience from the 'imaginary subject' of transcendental psychology and the metaphysics of transcendental idealism. Both these aspects of Strawson's work were evident in the papers delivered at the recent UK Kant Society conference on 'Strawson and Kant'.

Strawson himself discussed an important recent contribution to Kant scholarship, Rae Langton's *Kantian Humility*. Langton rejects Henry Allison's deflationary, 'double aspect' account of the distinction between appearances and things in themselves, maintaining that his interpretation fails to do justice to the genuine sense of loss Kant expresses at the unknowability of things as they really are. Langton proposes instead that the distinction be interpreted in the light of a substantive metaphysical thesis about the intrinsic properties of things. Given the Janus-faced picture of Kant that emerges from *The Bounds of Sense*, in which a suitably 'analytic' argument about the self-ascription of experiences is menaced by an idealistic 'dark side', Strawson's enthusiasm for Langton's view is easy to understand.

The relationship between descriptive metaphysics and Wittgenstein's later philosophy was the topic of a paper by Peter Hacker. Whilst recognizing the manifest difference between Wittgenstein's therapeutic philosophical temperament and Strawson's claim to generality, Hacker wondered whether there is not a Wittgensteinian way out of the difficulty in which Strawson finds himself when trying to account for the status of the fundamental propositions of our conceptual scheme. Strawson famously rejects Kant's description of such propositions as synthetic *a priori*.

Hacker also addressed Strawson's treatment of philosophical scepticism. This was the main concern of papers delivered by Barry Stroud, Robert Stern and Lilian Alweiss. Hacker expressed some unease about Strawson's naturalistic turn to Hume in *Skepticism and Naturalism* (1985). In that work, Strawson comes to accept that transcendental arguments do not provide a rational refutation of scepticism, and adopts instead a Humean position which seeks not to refute sceptical doubts, but to *dissolve* them by an appeal to the naturalness of our beliefs in, for example, the existence of the external world and other minds. Hacker interpreted Strawson's naturalistic turn in Quinean terms, and objected that the quasi-scientific argument in favour of the existence of the body illegitimately treats the belief in the body as a hypothesis. Stern questioned whether Strawson really does move in the direction of naturalized epistemology, while still managing to find grounds for suspecting the coherence of the turn from Kant to Hume.

Graham Bird, one of Strawson's most persistent opponents, asked whether Kant's descriptive metaphysics really belongs in the justificatory framework of traditional scepticism at all. No response to this challenge was forthcoming from Strawson, however, and he was similarly, and regrettably, reluctant to say more about his citation, in *Skepticism and Naturalism*, of Heidegger's assertion that the real 'scandal of philosophy' is not that a proof for the existence of the external world has yet to be given, 'but that such proofs are attempted again and again'.

Jonathan Derbyshire