

Rendezvous

Return(s) to Marx?

Institut français and Tate Modern, London, 31 May–1 June 2002

In the summer of 1977 more than 6,000 people attended the Communist Party's 'People's Jubilee' at Alexandra Palace in London, at a time when the Party could boast 28,000 comrades. Twenty-five years later, 'Return(s) to Marx?' was one of the few events on offer for those seeking an equivalent alternative on 'Jubilee weekend'. Never mind the Queen, Marx is back. Recovered from political and intellectual abandonment, Marx has re-emerged as a rich source of theoretical analysis with a decisive claim on the politics of the present. At least, this was what this conference asked its participants to consider, with particular attention to the French and British contexts. Organized as a predominantly French affair, the conference was proposed as part of an exchange, in which the British contribution will be extended though a reciprocal conference in France next year, dedicated to the British context. While this conference hoped to mark a revival of the Anglophone appreciation of French Marxism, the second leg is promised as a counter to the indifference of French intellectual culture to Anglophone Marxism, attested by the absence of French translations of such prominent figures as Raymond Williams and Fredric Jameson. Gregory Elliott illustrated the point, in a strong bid for anecdote of the conference: Louis Althusser's letter replying to *New Left Review's* suggestion that he respond to E.P. Thompson's notorious criticisms in *The Poverty of Theory*, began: 'Who is E.P. Thompson?'

The conference was divided into a consideration of the effects of the return to Marx on publishing, on the first day at the Institut français, and an examination of some of the arguments and positions this return has generated, on the second day at Tate Modern. The thesis that emerged from various contributors was that we have come to the end of a period of decline for Marx – a period of anti-Marxism even – on the Left, and that there are strong indications of a renewed interest and engagement with both Marx and Marxism. This decline was dated from the emergence of the *nouveaux philosophes* – emblemized, according to Dominique Lecourt, by their cover-page splash in *Time* magazine in 1977 – and the rise of Thatcherite neo-liberalism; while, the waning of the euphoric anti-Marxism that attended the dissolution of the USSR, and the re-emergence of systemic crises in the capitalist world economy combined with the beginnings of a resistance movement oriented against capitalism that is free of the Manichean logic of the Cold War, were taken to have brought an end to the taboo on Marx.

If France is leading the way here, presenting three avowedly Marxist candidates in the recent presidential elections, it is because it never suffered the scepticism over Marxism that has always characterized British culture, where, along with the idea of a socialist party, even the mention of the word 'capitalism' achieved the status of a profanity. As the playwright David Hare recently recalled from his embattled experiences of the 1980s: 'A commercial producer requested me to cut the word capitalism. Audiences, he said, don't like it. OK, I said, so what should I call it instead? Oh, he said, just call it life.' It seems that we are emerging from a period of capitalism's naturalization. And the questions that Marx once posed no longer appear to be severed from the present. But if something of this diagnosis was conceded by most contributors, the extent to which it should be considered a 'return to Marx' remained contentious.

Even the more enthusiastic prophets of this return were sanguine about the decimated landscape that left-wing publishing has become. The demise of key publishing houses such as Maspero and Lawrence & Wishart was noted. The long-term decline of left-wing bookshops has been exacerbated by book-buying on the Internet. This predicament was diagnosed by some as part of a more general decline in theoretical culture. One notable statistic quoted was that the average sale for philosophical books in France was 2,500 in 1979, 1,200 in 1989 and 650 in 1999. Jean Khalfa, an editor of *Les Temps modernes* and advisor to Routledge, lamented the replacement of non-specialist but theoretically challenging publications with pedagogic aids and trivial fashions aimed cynically at student courses and university libraries. Nonetheless, according to the conference brochure, within this bleak landscape there are signs of a resurgence of Marxism, especially in France, 'led particularly by philosophers such as Jacques Derrida and Alain Badiou, but extended also by intellectuals and sociologists such as Daniel Bensaïd, Dominique Lecourt and Miguel Abensour'. The best-selling sales of Hardt and Negri's *Empire* provided a repeatedly cited symbol of changes to come.

For two of the conference organizers their own journals were symptoms of the much heralded return. *Actuel Marx* was described by Eustache Kouvélakis as founded at a moment of deep retreat for Marxism in France, in 1987, but as currently experiencing a revival of interest such that its tri-annual conferences in 1995, 1998 and 2001 could present in the region of 100 papers. *Historical Materialism*, founded in 1997, was described by Sebastian Budgen as an attempt to develop a research project that would confront neo-liberalism politically and post-Marxism academically. However, Peter Osborne, speaking as an editor of *Radical Philosophy*, questioned the very idea of a return to Marx, in so far as it appealed to a repetition of previous returns to Marx, while



misrecognizing the difference such a repetition signals in the present situation. Thus, whereas the return to Marx instigated by Althusser et al. in the mid-1960s sought to generate a critique of Party orthodoxy through an unorthodox return to the original texts – a kind of unorthodox hyper-orthodoxy, similar to the strategy Lacan pursued in his return to Freud – today the idea of a return to Marx is transformed by the absence of an orthodoxy or party line. This absence generates the danger that the call to return to Marx now functions in the opposite way: as a call to orthodoxy.

This questioning of the conference title proved to be a popular theme. Like many of the speakers, Alex Callinicos was insistent that he was not involved in a return to Marx, since he had never left Marx in the first place. Instead of the idea of a return, Callinicos proposed that Marxism be thought as a tradition, in the sense of a critically self-transformative and therefore inventive process, rather than in relation to orthodoxy. Here, a tradition is defined by certain questions and historical decisions: for Callinicos, the decisions of Marx against Blanqui, Lenin against Kautsky, Trotsky against Stalin. Furthermore, he suggested that the defining question today is how Marxism relates to the new crises of capitalism subsequent to the Cold War, as well as to the new resistance movements that are emerging in the World Social Forum, which are by no means wholly sympathetic to the Marxist tradition. A radical process of critical self-transformation is therefore the task of contemporary Marxism.

Daniel Bensaïd introduced another alternative to the idea of a return to Marx: it is a question of ‘appointments with Marx’ and of what appointments we do not want to make again – not with the philosophy of history, not with economism, not with sociology, and so on. The situation today is such that we need to ‘re-accumulate the experience of a new cycle of crisis’ and renew the movement of resistance in the light of this new experience. On the other hand, despite these alternatives, Kouvélakis remained resolute, elaborating the idea of a return to Marx as a return of the repressed: Marx is the actively repressed condition of subaltern studies, which are characterized by a consensual pluralism, empiricist sociology, and liberal preoccupations with the individual, morality and justice. The articulation of this formation within the neo-liberal hegemony of Western capitalism calls for a return to Marx as a counter-hegemonic project. Jean-Jacques Lecercle proposed a transformation of Marxism via a transfusion of Anglophone philosophy of language. Esther Leslie, an isolated woman in the proceedings, presented a critique of the British formation of Cultural Studies, through an analysis of Punk as a critical cultural practice that traversed the anodyne division between high and low culture, and provided a model for a political renewal of cultural studies. But, after several anecdotes from the conference floor of disgruntled experiences of Punk concerts (including a memorable one about being engulfed in a shower of spitting), it was not clear that the deeper logic of such a practice had been appreciated.

Alain Badiou was the keynote speaker, delivering long addresses on both days. These concerned the attempt to develop a concept of politics from a non-dialectical conception of political subjectification, which claimed a transformative recovery of Marx via his conception of the political constitution of the proletariat. Setting out from a reading of Jean Genet’s play *Le Balcon* as a methodology of political action, Badiou proposed a critique of democracy as a mask for the hegemony of capitalist social relations. Democracy appears to resist capitalism, but in fact circulates within the capitalist political economy. This was demonstrated through a diagnosis of the recent presidential elections in France – the success of Le Pen over Jospin and the consequent ‘Le Pen or Chirac’ vote – as characteristic of this conservative function: the image of democracy coerced the Left into supporting the right-wing establishment because of its emblematic function as a value irreducible to capitalism. Instead, Badiou argued, we need a politics without images, a politics oriented beyond the circuit of images that constitute the present. This rather ecstatic, almost mystical conception of an imageless politics provoked several strong criticisms, deeply sceptical of an abstract negation of democracy that, along with being strictly unimaginable, would align the Left with a number of far-right tendencies. After all, it is not only the Left that does not like capitalism.

This conference was timely. There are many indications that a new, post-Soviet global movement of anti-capitalist resistance is emerging and gaining self-consciousness, with deep consequences for many aspects of contemporary culture, despite its being thrown into crisis almost immediately by the ‘war against terrorism’. But a return to Marx that might inform the present will demand a more extreme mediation between the immediacy of Marx and the immediacies of the present than was offered by most of the contributions to this conference. Too few engaged in a reinterpretation of Marx’s ideas in the transformed conditions of the present. Too often a rather scholastic preoccupation with the legitimacy of Marx’s œuvre was mobilized instrumentally, with ironically little engagement with the substance of that œuvre. Perhaps this is to be expected of the first, crude attempts at outlining a new project. Let’s hope that the French leg can make a little more headway.

Stewart Martin