

No camps in Dorking

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Terry Eagleton

WHY MARX WAS RIGHT
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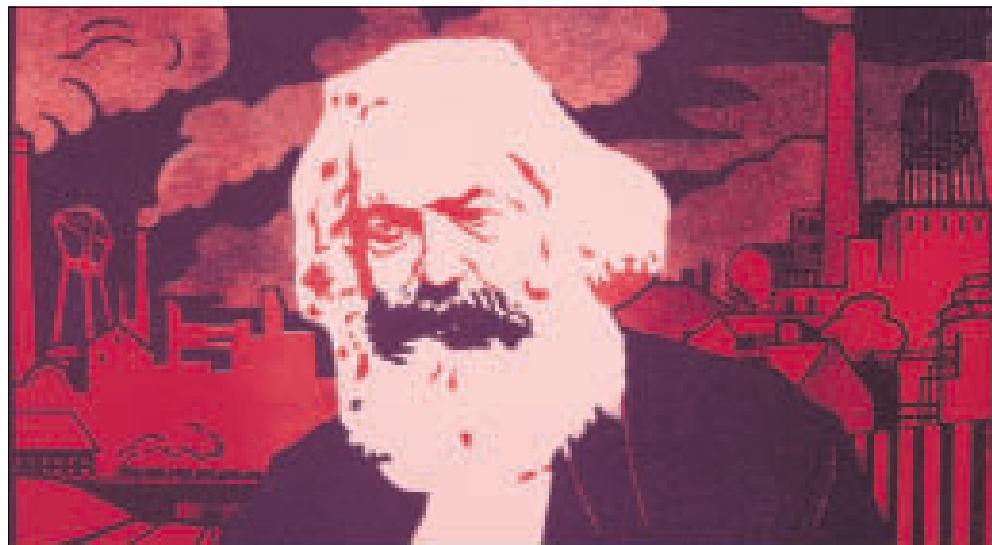
Is Terry Eagleton in earnest? The nagging question is stirred in the reader's mind by the very first sentence of the very first page of *Why Marx Was Right*. "This book had its origin in a single, striking thought", Eagleton tells us, "What if all the most familiar objections to Marx's work are mistaken? Or at least, if not totally wrongheaded, mostly so?"

Are we supposed to ignore the tongue in Eagleton's cheek? His political commitments are the stuff of well-honed legend. Readers of his memoir, *The Gatekeeper* (2002), can make an educated guess as to the place and time at which this "striking thought" first struck Eagleton: Cambridge in the early 1960s. That's almost fifty years and over forty books ago. Moreover, the question by now defines an entire genre. Jacques Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, Meghnad Desai's *Marx's Revenge*, Slavoj Žižek's reissue of classic texts by Trotsky and Mao, Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* all state the case.

The suspicion that Eagleton is pandering to a notionally naive readership is confirmed by the casualness with which he announces that his text will consist of ten wrong-headed ideas attributed to Marx, which he will rebut in "no particular order of importance". This is not, we are clearly meant to understand, anything as uncool as a systematic critique of Marx or Marxism. The first two chapters – on the supposed obsolescence of Marxism and on Marxism as unfreedom – and the last four chapters of the book – on class politics, on violence, on the State and on "new social movements" – more than deliver on this low-brow promise. The examples are up to date – Stalinism was like the internet dropped into the Middle Ages. The language is crude. "To go [*sic*] socialist, you need to be reasonably well-heeled". The Russian peasantry in the late 1920s were analogous to a "premodern tribe" confronted with capitalist management consultants – presumably because on a staid theory of social development, McKinsey is to premodern tribe as Stalinist collectivizer is to Ukrainian peasant. Since Stalinist violence was the result of backwardness, if true socialism "took over in the Home Counties", only an "unusually bold-faced" sceptic would ever expect "labour camps in Dorking". We are in the world of the *Idiot's* not the *Young Person's Guide*.

Chapters Three to Six, however – on determinism, utopia, economism and materialism – could be said to redeem the book. Here the knockabout language is toned down and Eagleton develops a version of Marxism that is consistent with his other well-documented commitments. What Eagleton distils out of Marx is a "philosophical anthropology", a view of our collective human nature on which to found a social and political theory and a vision of history. As individuated human beings we have in common our needy, labouring, sociable, sexual, communicative, self-expressive animal bodies. "Human consciousness . . . is corporeal . . . it is . . . a sign of the way in which the body is always in a sense unfinished, open-ended, always capable of more creative activity . . ." Change "is not the opposite of human nature", Eagleton insists: "it is possible because of the creative, open-

ended, unfinished beings we are". What drives history are the struggles individually and collectively to satisfy those needs. All hitherto existing history, or rather, in Marxian terms, pre-History, has about it the quality of compulsive, deterministic, forced motion precisely because of the impossibility under current conditions of reconciling individual needs collectively. But this oppressive, tragic reality is a spur to action. "There seems to be something in humanity which will not bow meekly to the insolence of power." As Eagleton puts it in the most lyrical lines of the book: "Tragedy is not necessarily without hope. It is rather that when it affirms, it does so in fear and trembling, with a horror-stricken countenance". Even if they haven't read Eagleton's recent book *Reason, Faith, and Revolution* (2009), some sensitive readers may thrill to the religious overtones in such passages. They may also be tempted to jump to the obvious conclusion: Professor Eagleton clearly believes that Karl Marx captured the truth about human nature. Socialism is the social and political system that best conforms to that nature. So why not simply reboot and rebuild society from those natural foundations up? Indeed, Eagleton him-



Marx poster from Baku, Azerbaijan c.1918

self teeters on the edge of that anti-historical vision in a tell-tale coda to Chapter Three: "Suppose a handful of us were to crawl out of the other side of a nuclear or environmental cataclysm, and begin the daunting task of building civilization again from scratch. Given what we know of the causes of the catastrophe, would we not be well-advised to try it this time the socialist way?"

But Eagleton knows better than to tarry too long with such 1980s dystopias. He knows he has history to deal with. Indeed, historians could do worse than to read the central theoretical sections of this book, as they should Eagleton's essays collected in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996). They provide a far more intelligent commentary on what was at stake

in postmodernism's attack on capital H history than was ever provided by the discipline's self-appointed guardians. But if history or, rather, the ugly development of pre-history is as critical as Eagleton knows it to be, then he owes us at least a sketch map of how we get from Marx's texts in the 1840s to the present. Indeed, Eagleton owes us two histories.

First of all, there is the problem of intellectual history. To derive a philosophical anthropology from the early Marx is certainly possible. But the intellectual project did not stop there. Why opt for this 1840s philosophical anthropology as opposed to other, later versions? Eagleton makes shy references to Nietzsche and even to Heidegger. He knows that his account of situated subjectivity could be read as akin to theirs. But the question of why their philosophical anthropologies lead them to political conclusions that Eagleton obviously finds distasteful is not among his chosen ten. If they are beyond the pale, what of other schools that developed closely related accounts of human agency and cognition? What about pragmatism, with its distinctive regional lineage from the St Louis Hegelians to the University of Chicago? Eagleton has no truck with Richard Rorty. He was under the influence of the later Germans. But what of John Dewey or George Herbert Mead? Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's accounts of the human condition star on any Western Civ course. Slightly further off the beaten track, how does Eagleton stand in relation to more recent German thinkers of a leftist

persuasion? Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth and Hans Joas all explored the question of how to found a radical politics on a philosophical anthropology. By the early 1970s, they were convinced that to do so one had to escape the confines of Marx's rereading of Ludwig Feuerbach.

But is all this too po-faced? Eagleton's ultimate justification for singling out Marx as a source of inspiration is rather different. It is the history of modern politics. As he puts it with suitable bluntness, there have never been "Cartesian governments, Platonist guerrilla fighters or Hegelian trade unions". Marxism was once a powerful political force. But that answer merely faces Eagleton with even more problems. He now has to explain how those

sympathetic to his brand of Marxian philosophical anthropology have actually related to the tortured history of Marxist politics in the twentieth century. How, for instance, does Eagleton place himself in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French existentialist whose account of human existence he clearly finds sympathetic? In 1947, Merleau-Ponty published *Humanism and Terror*, a remarkable meditation on the Stalinist terror. A few years later, faced with fresh and compelling evidence, Merleau-Ponty concluded that as a project of emancipation Communism had failed. Eagleton frequently invokes Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin. But as Eagleton knows, the Frankfurt School saw the violence of modernity as posing profound intellectual problems for Marxism. They came to see Marx's stress on human labour as dangerously complicit with coercive reality.

Whereas Merleau-Ponty and the Frankfurt School agreed in thinking that twentieth-century history called into question philosophical foundations derived from the mid-nineteenth century, Eagleton keeps the two neatly separated. He blithely expands the concepts of labour and production to include virtually every facet of self-realization. Meanwhile, the problem of Stalinist violence is simply waved aside. "To judge socialism by its results" in the Soviet Union, Eagleton remarks, "would be like drawing conclusions about the human race from a study of psychopaths in Kalamazoo". Apparently, life in industrial Michigan will drive one to bedlam as surely as Russian backwardness, and Stalin's cruelty barbarized Soviet Communism. This is British barroom Trotskyism at its laziest. As so often, Lenin escapes unscathed. "One of the first decrees of the Bolsheviks when they came to power", Eagleton announces with misleading glibness, "was to abolish the death penalty." "When the Soviet system fell", it collapsed "without much more [*sic*] bloodshed than had occurred on the day of its foundation." Does Eagleton not see the gross distortions involved in such throwaway lines? Surely there is no need to rehearse the escalation of violence from the liberal reformist politics of the February revolution of 1917 – the people who actually deserve credit for first abolishing the Tsar's brutal penal regime – to the lethal violence of Leninism? Žižek does not stoop to this kind of evasion. The shock effect of Lenin's unapologetic calls for violence and dictatorship is precisely what he revels in. Alain Badiou for his part acknowledges that if one is serious about restating the Communist hypothesis, one must begin with a meditation on failure rather than a self-righteous assertion of why Marx was right. But then, hard as it may be to credit, Badiou is in earnest about his politics. Even in a text as sloppy as this, Eagleton's commitment to his personal vision and humanist view is palpable. But is politics really what is at stake here? For generations of serious-minded predecessors, a philosophical anthropology much like that espoused by Eagleton led to various brands of reformist democratic politics. But for such people – militant young leftists matured into sceptical liberals – Terry Eagleton has only scorn. As he boasts in his memoir, "sheer horror of the cliché . . . has preserved me from this fashionable fate". He need not worry. His blustering concoction of Marxist literary humanism, crude class politics and pub humour is a personal brand all of his own.