reviews

The philosophy of oppression

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Hodge, Struckmann and Trost, Cultural Bases of Racism and Group Oppression, California, Two Riders Press, 1975

In the orthodox tradition of Philosophy, which we are supposed to believe stretches unbroken and unblemished from Socrates down to Strawson, there have been no more central questions and answers than those concerning the nature of human beings, or what people are. It is clear to many radical theorists today that, down the ages, philosophical doctrines on this topic effectively and continuously subserved the merciless oppression and exploitation of most of humanity by a minority of people. Understanding this about philosophy's past is an important part of seeing how and why philosophy can still have such a role today. But despite the efforts of radical philosophers in many countries the smug self-satisfaction, with which academic Philosophy contemplates its own image of itself as a supremely humane tradition, remains largely unperturbed. Further work in the radical history of philosophy is urgent and important. But, sadly, this book does not get us very much further forward.

Historical idealism

The central thesis of Hodge, Struckmann and Trost's book (HST for short) is that the practices of discrimination and oppression directed against such groups as blacks and women in Western societies have their basis, in some sense, in certain ideas and values which are central to the Western cultural tradition. This view is supported, in the series of extended essays which make up the book, by surveys of some of the ideas and values in question, such as the will, domination, philosophical dualism, Freudianism, rationalism, etc, and by looking at these notions in the work of thinkers such as Plato, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Descartes and Freud. Throughout the work, the authors propose that the negative results of such a world-view can be overcome, not by combatting it with political organisations built, in their view, on the very principles of authority and domination which are to be deplored in the existing social order, but primarily through replacing the old divisive and oppressive values and concepts with new collective, libertarian and egalitarian ones.

In his Introduction, Hodge tries hard to take up an agnostic or neutral position between the alternatives of materialism and idealism in the history of thought:

> The writings and ideas of these thinkers and philosophers are not necessarily the 'causes' of subsequent cultural patterns, but existing patterns support certain ideas, and the expression of these ideas reinforces the existing patterns. Thus, by examining the expressed ideas, we get a view of some of the cultural patterns existing when the ideas were expressed, and a view of some of the subsequent patterns supported and reinforced by those ideas. What the ultimate historical causes or origins are is not our concern. We examine past and present patterns and thoughts to get an understanding of the basic ingredients of Western culture today. Our major purpose is not to determine that A caused B in 500 BC, but to determine what changes can take place today to effect beneficial social change.
>
> 'Culture' is used here in a way which is common in sociology and anthropology, and it refers to the sum total of life patterns passed on from generation to generation within a group of people. Culture thus includes institutions, language, values, religious ideals, habits of thinking, artistic expressions, and patterns of social and interpersonal relationships. In Western societies, these ingredients of culture have developed within the framework of ideas, values and structures expressed during the centuries-old tradition of Western thinking. (p2)

As a Marxist, I can have no objection to the writer's recognition at this point that the relationship between human actions and human ideas is a two-way affair, still less to his placing the requirements of social action to change society for the better at a higher priority than any merely academic research into that relationship as it transpired in the distant past. However, there are several problematic aspects of this passage, which is the most careful treatment of the fundamental issues of method and interpretation in the book. I believe that, for all his apparent caution, Hodge has opted for a generally idealist orientation, that is, for the tacit assumption that human thought somehow precedes and makes possible human social reality.

Radical readers may already have noticed with some reservations Hodge's willingness to accept the concept of 'culture', here explained, from standard bourgeois sociology without any critical appraisal. And a careful look at the passage will show that Hodge does not really make it clear whether the 'ideas' are to be included within 'cultural patterns', or not. In the first paragraph there appears to be a distinction, of a pretty obviously dualist kind by the way, between the two. But in the second we are told that culture includes 'values, religious ideals, habits of thinking'. And if so, then clearly these items are neither the basis for, nor an explanation of culture, in which they are an integral part. Furthermore, if 'culture' includes the totality of human social life, including for example oppressive relationships between the sexes or between age-groups, then obviously culture cannot be an explanation for such patterns of oppression - whether or not it includes ideas.

The concept of 'culture' supposedly clarified by Hodge covers everything, and therefore can explain nothing. He and his co-authors escape this impasse in the chapters which follow by substituting 'ideas' for 'culture', along the lines of the claim in the first quoted paragraph, that a survey of ideas is an adequate substitute for a survey of a culture as an

entire nexus of patterns of social life. It is the ideas values, and structures of Western thinking, we are told at the end of the second paragraph, which have provided the framework within which the rest of Western culture, such as institutions and social relationships of all kinds, has developed. And two paragraphs later (p3), Hodge puts this idealist view of history still more bluntly:

'... this oppression occurs because of some basic features of these values.'
(emphasis in original)

The indifference as to the direction of causality is short-lived! And as the Introduction continues, the identification of culture with ideas becomes total, and the cautious confusion of the explanation quoted above is forgotten. The idealist causal hypothesis is repeated:

'... some of the basic causes of sexism in Western societies are derived from the same set of ideas.' (p5)

and

'Our examination in this book of some of the causes of this oppression ...' (p7)

- for the book examines nothing but ideas!

There is, of course, something very odd about the position taken in the first quoted passage above, that we need to study the past in order to act effectively to improve our present society, but that our understanding of past ideas and past cultures need not, for that purpose, be a causal one! For if we are content not to know what leads to what, how can we make such fundamental political choices as, for example, that between giving primary emphasis to the struggle of ideas, or giving primary emphasis to the struggle between social classes? But in effect, HST have chosen the former of these two alternative emphases, and their verbal derogation of causal views in the history of thought is only meant as a camouflage, behind which they entrench their own causal view, which is decidedly idealist, as I hope I have already begun to show. What I want to suggest in the rest of this article are some reasons for rejecting such an approach in favour of a materialist one.

Innocent ethnocentrism

There is a flat contradiction between HST's repeated attacks, throughout the book, on the Western dualist notion of the supremacy of the mind over the body, reason over 'nature', the head over the heart etc, on the one hand, and, on the other, their confident belief that radical ideas in radical heads are all that is needed to transform society in all its material and practical aspects. The fact that such radical intellectualism has been made 'respectable' on the Left by thinkers like Marcuse and even, after 1968, Mandel, and by journals such as New Left Review, should not blind us to its shortcomings, as these are plainly instantiated by HST. Hodge, for example, spends 37 pages documenting and deprecating the primacy of the will in Western dualist conceptions of people and society. Then, without the least self-consciousness, humour, or embarrassment, he concludes: 'I want to believe that it is not day-dreaming to speak of hope.'! (my emphasis)
So much for the primacy of the will in those who oppose themselves to the primacy of the will on purely idealist terms. And indeed, voluntarism has been the usual resort of radical idealists or liberal rebels such as these authors.

In general, HST prefer to cite, as sources for theories to agree with, the most recent, most American and most sociological authorities they can find. 'Marx' and 'class' are taboo words. When the central thesis of historical materialism is referred to (but not applied) on page 15, the quotation comes, not from The German Ideology, but from two worthy but innocuous American academics, writing in 1959 as if the idea had just occurred to them - which perhaps, alas, it had. When a list of basic works on imperialism is given (p12), Fanon, Magdoff and Gerassi are among those cited; Marx, Hobson, Bukharin and Lenin are not. When the division between mental and manual labour is discussed, we are not referred to Marx and Engels, but to the more modish, new-left-ish, and above all American treatment of some of their ideas by Eldridge Cleaver in Soul On Ice.

The ethnocentric perspective, the Californian limitations to HST's historical understanding, can be illustrated by the following remark (p210): 'The progress of science in mastering nature enables us to have more; it does not enable us to be more.' For who are the 'us', here assumed as interlocutors, if not that minority of the world's population, black and white, who occupy certain class positions in the rich metropolitan and also in the peripheral countries? HST seem quite unaware that, despite the technological explosion which is indeed one of this century's central features, the per capita real income of humanity as a whole did not increase between 1900 and 1950, so far as this can be calculated. The remark quoted could not be made, therefore, except from an ethnocentric viewpoint, whereby the 'us' does not stand for humanity as a whole, still less for the working people of the world.

A similar distortion mars the outline history of the African slave trade, given by Trost in Part II. She formulates the thesis, which I have called 'historical idealism', as follows: 'It appears that if black people had been less negatively perceived by white people four hundred and fifty years ago, they might not have been subjected to life-long bondage.' (p53)
On her account, the modern imperialist slave trade first began in the 16th century when 'the English' suddenly encountered 'the Africans'. She ignores all previous interaction between other European peoples and African ones. She disregards surveys by authors such as Hobson, Curtin or Braudel of the way in which Venice, Genoa, France, Portugal and Spain, together with military Orders like the Knights of St John, had pioneered sugar and slavery from Crete to Brazil between the 14th and 16th centuries. She seems unaware of the important continuity between ancient and modern slavery in the Mediterranean area, out of which the traffic of the Middle Passage was developed. She neglects the role of the expansion of Islam, and especially of the Turkish seizure of Constantinople in the middle of the 15th century, in bringing about the assimilation of slavery with 'colour' for the first time in Western history. And therefore, having suppressed or failed to look for appropriate historical explanations, she offers instead an implausible psychological fable. The English, who are incidentally supposed to have been a nation of puritanical prudes in the age of Marlowe and Henry VIII, sort out their relationships to Africans not by developing them within the earlier framework of European invasion and the long-standing trade in gold and slaves, but only by means of verbal associations surrounding the word 'black'. The etymological speculation with which she supports this claim is very dubious, in that the available evidence for early English and related languages suggests that 'black' and 'white' began life as terms with very broad meanings, rather than starting out

as precise colour terms and acquiring their connotations only from a dualist view of the universe. But leaving that question to one side, historical explanations which base everything on the conceptual apparatus of a society seem unconvincing. Apart from other defects, such an approach is almost bound to fail to see how the 'same' thing may be said in different epochs with very different effective meaning, despite the verbal similarities, and, doubtless, cultural continuities which preserve a form while its content changes.

Changeless dualism

HST's view of Western intellectual history can be summed up in the tag which says that the more it changes, the more it stays the same. The basis and origin of all that they are opposed to is a framework of ideas - Western dualism. They claim that this has always taken a wholly Manichean form. That is, it has always seen the whole of reality as a struggle between mind-good-white-male-reason, on the one hand, and matter-bad-black-female-emotion, on the other. From Plato down to Freud, through vastly different historical stages of Western society, they think this basis has been maintained without any really important changes or development. Among other things, this ahistorical interest in history means they have nothing to say about the origins and development of communist and monist ideas, in opposition to the dualist tradition.

An idealist view of history can seem to explain many things. But it cannot explain ideas, since these are the basic causes which it proposes for all else that happens. So it cannot be much interested in the development of thought, and especially not in the complex details of how thought actually develops. To an idealist, such changes are likely to appear arbitrary and inexplicable, and to be set down to mythical factors such as 'genius', 'effort', 'decadence', 'betrayal' etc.

That is why HST do not explain racism and sexism, let alone the detailed development of such ideas, in terms of their historical functions at different times. They ignore, also, the wider relation between specialised ideological conformations such as these, and the general oppression of most people in most countries in all past eras and also in the present. After all, not only had what was said about blacks in the 17th and 18th centuries already been being said about women for centuries before that. But what was said about blacks and women was always also said about working people in general, from Plato's Republic down to Captain Pim's bilious outburst, at a meeting of the British Anthropological Society in 1869, against 'pandering to Negroes, the working classes, and the Celtic Irish'!

Some of the complexities which HST never get around to discussing are indicated in two articles by R H Popkin and H Bracken (see Bibliography) to which they make no reference. In these, it is shown quite convincingly how difficult it was, and remains, to base a racist or a sexist position on orthodox dualism. Because dualism regards the material side of people as inessential to them, and even as unreal in some sense, it cannot accept that such a physical characteristic as colour or sex is in itself a true quality of the immaterial person. The situation is different with any Manichean version of dualism, which sees both aspects of reality as having equal status in constituting the being of any kind of thing, including people. It is also different with empiricism and early materialisms. Since none of these views think of matter, the human body and human physiological features as unreal or irrelevant, they can link these things with inferiority and unreason, and can thus provide an intellectual foundation for racism and other oppressive ideologies. Popkin and Bracken argue that it is the Lockean, rather than the Cartesian tradition in early modern Europe, which provided the best support for imperialism. The Catholic Church was not well equipped, intellectually, to legitimate the enslavement and brutal oppression of Slavs, Asians, Americans and Africans. Of course it could and did resort to all kinds of devices, such as sophistry, refusal to acknowledge the facts, or straightforward concession to the worldly interests of its bourgeois clients, so as not to rock its own very lucrative boat.

Dualist attempts to provide racist theories in support of the European invasions were necessarily limited to unsatisfactory assertions. One of these, a re-worked version of the old Aristotelian lie about women, was the claim that blacks had no souls, but were rather, in Cartesian terms, soulless animals or biological machines, whose apparent pain or pleasure, moral or other human qualities, were no more than accidental simulations of the real thing as found in white Europeans, and could therefore safely be ignored for moral or legal purposes. This 'theory' has remained as part of the gutter resources of racism. But it never became very influential in intellectual terms, and it is worth pausing to see why. Briefly, the point was that it was not only black chattels that the

'Can the same mind, the same soul, inhabit such different bodies?'

rising bourgeois class needed to oppress with theories of their inferiority. And a theory which denied all human status to the oppressed was simply not on, when the oppressed were closer to their oppressors as workers and women were inside Europe, and when once the free market society had begun to make cases of rapid loss or gain in social status quite commonplace.

Early modern racist theories, I suggest, were just part of a more general attempt to solve an intellectual crisis brought about by the beginnings of a new social order. The breaking open of the closed and hierarchical medieval view of society and the world, and the gradual formation of a modern Europe populated by nominally free (male) individuals in a free labour market, may have taken centuries to come about in reality. But at the level of ideology, of the vindication of an oppressive social order, the problems it posed were immediate, and were widely and quickly taken up. It was not only Winstanley who could see that such a society, based on legal equality and practical inequality, was in violent contradic-

tion with itself, to say nothing of its relationships with others which it might be destroying in America or Africa.

Racist theories about the origins of supposed national or regional characteristics, including colour, had in earlier times been centred on scientistic speculations about the effects of climate, diet and other factors in producing variations in humanity over time. Stretching back to Hippocrates, such notions had become a commonplace of European thought in the prejudices felt by every 'nation' towards all others. But such ideas were wholly inadequate when it came to explaining why persons of the same nation, the same sex and the same colour should receive such great disparities in power and wealth. For this, only a theory of innate differences could provide appropriate legitimation.

Individual 'differences'

The earlier social order had indeed had its own theory of innate differences, in the general distinction, capable of various refinements, between 'base' and 'noble' birth or 'blood'. So long as birth did, by and large, serve to assure a person's status or lack of it, these ideas were roughly satisfactory. But in the new, more open, more competitive society, birth was at least beginning not to be enough to protect or prevent people from obtaining the results of their failure or success in the free market. The genetic basis for status lost or acquired would therefore have to lie more definitely in the individual, and less so in their family background, as this became less relevant in practical terms.

And so, towards the close of the medieval and start of the modern era, roughly in the 15th century, there is another raid on the intellectual store-cupboards of the Greeks and Arabs, and such a theory begins to take its place in the general cultural vocabulary. Words like 'humour' and 'temperament' enter the English language, for example, as part of the jargon of a doctrine which purports to explain why there should not or cannot be equal fulfilment or equal reward even within one society, because 'abilities' are not equal.

At about the same time, Luther and Calvin and others contributed a theological doctrine to support the material domination of a bourgeois 'elect' over the stormy sea of proletarian 'sinners', despite the absence of any readily observable physical differences between the two groups. (Unless we are to remember those brought about by malnutrition, and noticed indeed by some of the very first visitors to Europe from 'this new world lately discover'd', according to Montaigne's entertaining account:

> ... secondly, (they have a way of speaking in their language, to call men the half of one another) ... they had observ'd, that there were amongst us, men full, and cramm'd with all manner of conveniences, whilst in the mean time, their halves were begging at their doors, lean, and half starv'd with hunger and poverty; and thought it strange, that these necessitous halves, were able to suffer so great an inequality and injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throats, or set fire to their houses. (Montaigne, Essay XXIV, trans. Cotton, 1700)

The Calvinist view is, if taken at face value, a dualist one, which simply asserts a qualitative difference to inhere in the unobservable souls of the privileged as opposed to the underprivileged. This view could easily be extended to cover women or blacks, by asserting not so much that they had no souls, but that they had souls which were somehow inferior, and which therefore merited an inferior position in the social order. But though this looks like an oppressive ideology in the dualist mode identified by HST, I think such an interpretation should not be adopted without caution. It is hard to settle such questions, but there are very often assumptions, examples, and suppressed premises in such an ideological formation, which can mean that in practice it was not quite so other-worldly as it appears to be in its principal written records and dogmatic texts. For in practice what the Calvinist meant by the absence of the state of grace was nothing more or less than certain completely material and social features of the kind of people whose oppression it was desirable to sanctify. This is supported by the detailed records, regulations, court proceedings etc extant from the Reformation.

What the pseudo-scientific genetic theories and the pseudo-dualistic theological theories agree on, is that the masses of exploited working people are appropriately placed in society because they are a different kind of human being to their exploiters. This 'racism', or really 'class-ism', was deployed primarily and crucially within European societies. It was mere consistency and convenience to extend it to deal with the invasion and oppression of peoples in other parts of the world. (An inverted form of the same link was the later claim, adopted by Gobineau and others, that the European lower classes were the descendants of earlier inferior European natives, subordinated by Aryan conquest.) Parallels in treatment and attitude towards black slaves and white 'servants' are quite common, but perhaps it is worth mentioning that statistical estimates for the horrifying loss of life amongst slaves on the Middle Passage, at about 20-25%, are much lower than the equally appalling figures for the Botany Bay fleets of white convicts, at 30-50%. Not only was the latter voyage much less within the technical capacity of the age. The convicts, as government assets, were doubtless of far less consequence to those placed in charge of them than slave 'goods' being carried for vast private profits. On the other side of the picture, it must be stressed that there is absolutely no comparison in numbers between the few thousands of transported convicts sent to Europe's penal settlements, and the hundreds of thousands of Africans enslaved over about four centuries.

As genetic or at least 'endowment' theories of the inferiority of the oppressed were revived and cast into the mode of the new individualism, so too the older climatic theories for the inferiority of foreign peoples had to be abandoned, in the interests of white colonisation into non-European climatic conditions. Sun-hats or no sun-hats, Europeans could not avoid living in the same climate as the despised 'natives'. So it must no longer be the climate which made the blacks inferior, but an innate, inheritable inferiority. In this case, individual variations could be discounted, since the point was to repress an entire, easily identifiable group beyond any chance of individual exceptions. Thus the blacks were the occasion of a retreat from sophistication in the theory of the oppressors. Like medieval villeins, they were all 'vile', in the language of the hymn, and their baseness lay in their 'blood'. Hence the nominal ban on miscegenation, as a potential threat to the inherited superiority of the conquerors. The ban had no intention to protect the oppressed peoples of the world from

sexual invasion and abuse. It was merely designed to protect the oppressors from the undesirable social consequences which might ensue, if their privileges began to be conceded to the demands of people of 'mixed blood'. Alongside this genetic licence for Saturday nights went an imperialist Calvinism for Sunday mornings - the White Man's Burden or Manifest Destiny theory.

Hume's contribution

In this context, the racist views of Hume can, I hope, be understood more clearly than they are by Popkin, Bracken, or HST. Though none of these authors mention it, Hume tears the old climatic variety of racism into little pieces. By the 18th century there was a serious lack of any plausible scientistic alternative with which to replace it. The physiology of humours and temperaments, based as it was in medieval physics and medicine, had been undermined by more than two centuries of spectacular advance in those disciplines, but this had not yet produced anything of much use to racism. In the Lockean tradition, individual differences of 'ability' might be explained in terms of upbringing and education. In the sphere of international, as opposed to intra-national, exploitation, this view was developed into 'cultural' theories of superiority and inferiority, of which more later. But progressive thinkers were increasingly naive enough to ask why such factors could not be made equally advantageous for every child within their society, and eventually for all children everywhere.

Hume, too, had nothing new to offer racist theory. In 28 pages on the slave populations of the ancient world, he refuses to justify slavery by reference to anything more than naked force. He might almost be said to have shirked his alleged ideological role altogether, were it not for the infamous footnote to his essay 'Of National Characters', which is regularly quoted, but seldom analysed, by horrified liberals.

Consistently with the historical background I have sketched, the footnote offers a genetic racist conjecture, more an arrogant hypothesis than a worked-out explanatory theory. (Like 'soul', 'nature' or 'breed' were not really explanatory concepts until later biology had provided intelligible models of the mechanisms of biological inheritance and individual differences.) Alleging a total lack of achievement in 'negroes' as compared with all other kinds of people, Hume suggests that: 'Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction between these breeds of men.' With sound scientific instincts, Hume adduces the example of Africans actually living in Europe as the crucial case, in which he contrasts the Africans' universal failure to advance themselves with the occasional European instance of how 'low people, without education, will start up amongst us, and distinguish themselves in every profession'. Hume's own prejudice prevents him from observing that there was still some difference between African slaves and free European proletarians, which had nothing to do with the 'breed' of the former, but everything to do with the different form of their oppression. And the same blindness stops Hume recognising that in fact very many Africans had 'advanced' in Europe - in the relatively few cases where they had been able to settle there as free people.

Apart from a few lightweight observations on Hobbes, already made by Kropotkin 75 years ago, HST are silent on materialist or anti-dualist traditions in European thought. They are also very reticent about the historical origins of their own idealist philosophical politics in the Romantic tradition, with its ultimate sources in Rousseau and Kant. Thus, in their one-sided characterisation of Western culture as rationalist, theoretical, and verbal, they suppress the past five hundred years of respect for and use of music and the plastic arts, to say nothing of the cult of health, youth and sexuality which has been so prominent now for at least a century. But the role of various anti-rationalist movements in modern times ought to give us some pause, before we accept that everything 'wrong' with Western culture can be solved by movements away from rationality. Such movements have already been with us some time, and have as much blood on their hands as do the casuists of rationalism.

From Hume, HST's sporadic historical attention leaps on to Freud, thus passing over the whole period during which the most abiding pseudo-scientific traditions in racist theory were founded by such writers as Galton and Gobineau. Once and however arrived at Freud, though, we get a 30-page essay which is perhaps the best thing in the book. This is because Freud, at last, is the kind of Manichean dualist, even if a rather materialist or agnostic one, which they have been looking for all along. The old Pythagorean duality re-forms itself in Freudian theory in the opposition between the principles of life and of death, of eros and thanatos. But HST are baffled by Freud's overt refusal to take up any evaluative preference between the two.

It is a pity that HST do not actually look closer, at the way in which, as a sexist theory, Freudianism elaborates a myth which disguises the reality that, in capitalist society, the great majority of penis-owners have no social power and no creative role in the propagation of culture, which they do not so much practice as consume. In the Freudian system, a sexist machismo is to be distracted with delusions as to its power over oppressed and 'incomplete' women. That power is real, and the women's fight against it is important. But Freud's theory also had a larger role to play. For instead of any real power to control their own lives, it offered to men a substitute authority, which was not only a sham (since power over those who are supposedly powerless is not much power), but also the very opposite of power. For sexist practices divide men from their invalidated sisters, and make it impossible for working people to achieve that collective solidarity which is the essential pre-condition for their ever achieving self-government. Thus sexist ideologies subserve ruling class interests just as directly as do racist ones. They are directed at women, or blacks, and must be confronted on those terms. But they are also articulated for the oppression of most male whites in metropolitan capitalist countries. HST pay no attention to this function, which is every bit as important as the other.

Cultural racism

Despite an idealist repugnance for any biologistic theories of racism or sexism, HST do not hesitate to offer rationalisations for 'differences' between kinds of people, which seem to me to press their cultural hypotheses very close to the boundaries of genetic racism. They appeal to white bourgeois sociologists and black radicals alike, only to claim that what white racists have always said about Africans and Afro-Americans (the jumbling together of so many different kinds of society into a single

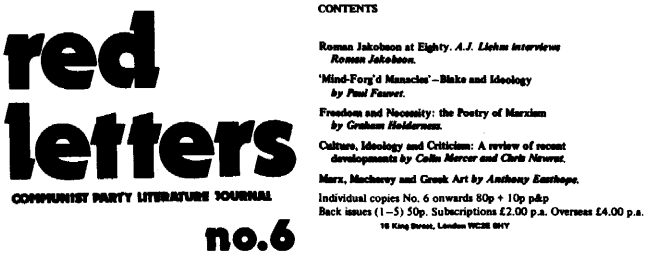
'culture' is that of HST and the racists, and not mine) is true after all. 'They' are more 'aesthetically oriented', 'nonverbal', 'nonconceptual', 'concrete', 'intuitive', 'sensual' etc than 'we' are! 'Part of the American tragedy is that the black man ... has often denied the aesthetic, physical side of himself...' To confirm this, they cite that leading Jim Crow of neo-colonialist ideology, Leopold Senghor. And then they let him cap it all with a piece of outright genetic myth: 'The African's spirituality is rooted in his sensuality: in his physiology.' ! (pp108-10) But what is the innate self which the black American is said to have often betrayed, if it is not his 'nigger blood'? He may be a suburban doctor with a taste for Mozart and bridge, but since he's black, HST seem to know what he needs, what he must be hypocritically and 'tragically' denying himself, is nothing but jazz, pot, and polygamy! Surely these claims about a 'culture' which goes with the colour of your skin are not so much intelligent theory as the compensatory fantasies of an inadequate political practice.

HST have also assumed, or rather accepted from racist social scientists, that non-literate societies, such as those of parts of Africa in the past, of the Incas, of north-west Europe in the megalithic period, or of early American slavery, must always be relatively non-theoretical, non-scientific, non-conceptual. The achievements of the megalithic culture in astronomy are enough to refute this at a stroke. Of course it is unlikely that the slave barracks echoed with abstract disputations in the few hours granted as relief from miserable labour. People uprooted from their own societies could not preserve much of the theoretical and speculative riches of their own civilisation in such traumatic circumstances. But that is no proof that African societies had no science, no philosophy. Americans of all colours seem too ready to be told that normal African societies before the invasions were culturally very similar to the damaged and thwarted life of slavery. In black thinkers, this distortion may ease the savage pain of an irrecoverable loss. In whites, it has no such excuse.

Taoist solutions?

HST's political remedy for the evils of dualism is that we should continue to be dualists, but dualists in balance and integration, rather than in competition and oppression. We should become Taoists, seeking balance and harmony, and adopting a practice in which 'nothing needs to be fought or conquered to achieve balance (p126). HST never repudiate the distinction between mind and matter, soul and body, male and female, thought and feeling, reason and emotion, science and art, proof and intuition, 'European' and 'African'. They confine themselves to preaching, willing and permitting that the hitherto despised and obstructed 'side' of life may now be graciously raised up into equal status alongside its age-old oppressor and 'superior'.

Thus, in their concluding section (249), HST assert that 'To move beyond Dualism is to see that economic, material factors and mental, psychological, intellectual factors interact and mutually effect the social structure and our personal lives'. But isn't 'interactionism' another name for 'dualism'? HST give no reasons for their Cartesian assumption that economic factors are always distinct from mental ones, or that material factors cannot be psychological ones. Both theoretically and politically, they can try to move beyond dualism only on dualism's own terms.



Progressive idealists must sooner or later embrace a flight from reality. Thus, in the political programme with which they close the book, HST suppose without attempting to prove it that 'alternative' social groups and their associated counter-culture will peacefully and gradually build themselves up until they replace the existing oppressive social order. The existing institutions are expected 'to crumble from their own inadequacies and internal contradictions'. Though it may occasionally happen that the alternative structures have to be 'defended from attempts by the existing structure to destroy them', and this may 'have to involve the use of arms' (p252). (These Taoists evidently draw the line at Buddhism!)

Now, liberals and idealists are fond of accusing Marxists, incorrectly, of holding millenialist beliefs to the effect that people do not need to act to overthrow their oppressors, since history and the inevitable crisis of capitalism will some day do it all for them. But here HST, who I have argued are idealists, really do think that in building alternative structures it will be possible for them and their friends to turn their backs on historical class action to bring down the mighty oppressors of humanity from their thrones of power.

The social realities to which these political fantasies belong, of drop-out commune dwellers hawking their hand-made souvenirs to tourists along the highways of California and New Mexico, scarcely bear thinking about for very long. Such 'structures' provide comfortable enough accommodation on the fringes of the system, within which a marginal fraction of the population can cultivate their own 'transformed' selves. Such let-outs have always existed. Far from being built by rebels who are undermining the system, they are that part of the system through which it disarms and contains its rebels. A million Thoreaus are not going to keep the President awake nights. There probably are that many snugged down in the communes, the campuses and the macrobiotic restaurants of the United States already. But a million Mother Joneses would boil a different kettle of fish!

Select bibliography of modern authors:

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The king's head

Graham Burchell

E Balibar, On the Dictatorship of the Proletariat, NLB, London, 1977, £6.50 hb, with an introduction by Grahame Lock and an afterword by Louis Althusser

Balibar's title essay, which forms the core of this book, was written in response to the decision of the 1976 Congress of the French Communist Party (PCF) to abandon the notion of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' in its formulation of a 'democratic' strategy for a peaceful transition to 'socialism' in France ('socialism in French colours': Marchais). It is primarily concerned with the terms in which this decision was conceived in the Party debate and with outlining the elements of what the author conceives to be the 'true definition' of the 'theoretical concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Balibar's essay marks out the distance that separates the conceptions informing the PCF's decision from those thought to comprise Marxist-Leninist theory.

As well as Balibar's essay the book also includes: a dossier of extracts from the pre-Congress debate (G Haddad, 3 pieces from Marchais, Balibar's own brief contribution, and a reply to Balibar from G Besse); a speech from Althusser presenting his judgement on the 'historical significance' of the debates and decisions (Ben Brewster's alternative translation of this can be found in New Left Review 104, differing in some interesting respects from the translation provided here by Lock); a 'Postscript' to the English edition by Balibar; and an 'Introduction' by the translator Grahame Lock.

Connotations of power

It is extremely difficult to know how to review the material collected in this book. Woven in and around a political event are contributions arising from diverse sources and functioning at many different levels. Placed within the covers of a book under the signature of Balibar (with Althusser and Lock partially sharing authorial honours), these contributions are called upon to play a role quite different from the one they originally performed. It is beyond the scope of this review to untangle the multiple inscriptions which either contributed to this definite historical event or later 'remembered' it, but we should note the power of connotations acquired by words in this context ("The 22nd Congress has taught us several times over to be very careful with words': Althusser).

Take, for example, the words of Georges Marchais when he claims that the word "'dictatorship" ... has an intolerable connotation', later spelling out what it is that makes it so 'intolerable' in saying that it 'automatically evokes the fascist regimes of Hitler, Mussolini, Salazar and Franco ...' And ...? Althusser unkindly supplies the silent connotations that everyone hears but which are so intolerable to Marchais that he cannot bring himself to utter them: the Soviet Union, Stalin, the Gulag ...

Or, again, take Balibar's own contributions where the qualification 'theoretical' gives his words a different trajectory. This discourse, coming from the pen of a master of the 'theoretical', is restricted (modestly) to the 'restoration' of 'definitions' at the level of abstract theoretical 'concepts'. It works through its seeming to call into existence a stable base of established 'theory' which, as the foundation for Balibar's theses, is already in place, and from which his arguments are able to appear as no more than deductions (bolstered of course by the occasional rhetoric of reference to 'historical experience'). Like Marx's coat into which the tailoring has vanished, Balibar presents the instantly recognisable features of 'concepts' that 'belong' to Marxism as value 'belongs' to the coat. A return, a restoration, a definition, a clarification ('we have only tried to clarify the terms of the discussion'). But all carrying the weight and value, the authority of a source and a tradition that flows from it. Or, in other words perhaps, a vanishing trick in which the diverse sources of concepts and problems, out of which has been woven that effect of recognisability, disappear.

In this review I will restrict my comments in the main to the question of power in its relation to 'class struggle' as it is presented by Balibar. My justification for this restriction is the belief that it is the question of power that is central to the 'discussion'.

Out of the ghetto?

The force and attraction of the PCF's new line (and, perhaps, of the general phenomenon called 'Eurocommunism') is that it appears to open up the prospect of access to some form of political power, in particular, to governmental power within a 'liberal democracy'. It appears to take this prospect seriously and to engage realistically within the existing field of politics in a way that offers calculable concrete possibilities for the transformation of the conditions of modern forms of class struggle. It appears to point towards a strategy with definite consequences for the economic and political conditions of revolutionary intervention. It would seem to offer a liberation from dogmatism, from the gestural denunciations of 'capitalism' and 'bourgeois democracy', from the imaginary and repetitive scenarios of 'revolution': Marxism 'creatively developed and applied', as the stock phrase has it. The advantages of this over the abstract dogmatizing of the 'left', with its seeming fear of power, appear to be immense. Against this, Balibar's excursus into the field of 'definitions' appears to offer nothing in terms of an effective engagement in the current political field. It appears to return us to generalities formally deduced from a set of axioms which are coupled with the usual ritual pieties concerning the need for those 'concrete analyses' which never seem to emerge.

But, on the other hand, what is the cost of the PCF's attempt to emerge from the political ghetto? Does it imply a capitulation to the terms and conditions of the enemy? Balibar strongly suggests that this is indeed the cost of the PCF's bid for power. The PCF, at the moment when it sees the prospect of power, submits to terms and conditions which are themselves the effects of a certain power. A bid for power which proceeds with a kind of blindness to power. Behind the abandonment of a word with 'intolerable connotations' is advanced an 'alternative strategy' for the achievement of political power.

But in dropping this word the PCF succeeds only in evading the question of power. And, in evading it, unwittingly perhaps adopts other 'words' which are the weapons of its enemies' power. The adoption of an 'alternative' strategy effectively transforms the strategic objective, i.e. power itself.

In abandoning the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is anything lost that was indispensable to a revolutionary politics? Perhaps not, but in abandoning the word we do not thereby abolish the question of power itself. The problems of the dictatorship of the proletariat and of State power have long been reduced to a dead letter in Marxism - a set of connotations and 'famous quotations' - does the debate in the PCF succeed in bringing these problems to life?

Balibar's essay seeks to answer the question: 'What is the dictatorship of the proletariat?' A problem of definition. But, in the context of the decision of the 22nd Congress, there are in fact two questions: what is the dictatorship of the proletariat in 'Marxist theory'? what is it in the PCF's decision to reject it? Is what the PCF abandons the same as what Balibar defends through definition? Balibar first sets out the terms in which the PCF conceives proletarian dictatorship before proceeding to his restoration of the 'true' (i.e. Lenin's) 'definition'.

According to Balibar, the PCF presents its rejection of the notion of dictatorship of the proletariat as a result of a choice between alternative means of reaching a given (unchanged) goal. He aims to show both that this choice is illusory and that its effect is to undermine the proper goal of Marxists. The separation of strategic means from their objectives has the effect of erasing that which makes a communist strategy communist. The PCF presents a choice in terms of a series of oppositions which define the alternatives democratic/dictatorial: 'naturally' it 'chooses' the former. Balibar claims that the set of oppositions by means of which this choice is conceived and made are: violent versus peaceful means; legal versus illegal methods; and majority versus minority basis for policy and action. Once again we hear the reverberations of 'intolerable connotations'. At the same time as these sets of oppositions evoke a certain conception of politics, at the same time as they mark an 'adjustment' to 'new conditions' and the recognition of the possibility of a 'peaceful road' to socialism in the West, they also silently refer to the Soviet Union and its history as the locus of a set of characteristics to which the PCF opposes its road.

The PCF presents its programme as a democratic alternative for the achievement of socialism. Alternative to what? The implied reference would seem to be to that other 'alternative' adopted in the Soviet Union for its achievement of 'socialism': violent, 'illegal', minoritarian, i.e. dictatorial. This posing of questions of strategy at the level of a choice between alternative means of realising a given same end ('don't think we have ceased to be communists! don't say that we have relinquished our objectives!') has definite implications. It enables the PCF to simultaneously condemn the 'crimes' committed in the Soviet Union (illegality, violent repression), to reject its 'abuse' of civil rights (dictatorial methods), whilst nonetheless 'saving' the Soviets for 'socialism (that - whatever it is - is not in doubt). The implication is that the goal of 'socialism' can be characterized independently of the social and political relations of power which are conditions for its existence. That is, that it can be characterized at the level of an economic essence apart from the essentially contingent 'superstructural' forms of 'democracy' or 'dictatorship'. This implication is inscribed in the use of the oppositions dictatorship/democracy as absolutes characterising 'alternatives' at the level of political means to a given (economic) end. This is a procedure which evades the essential. It evades (if it does not make it impossible even to pose) the question of the social and political relations of power that are the conditions for the transformation and/or maintenance of definite economic relations. It evades the question of the forms, operations and effects of forms of social and political power in their articulation on to economic relations. By separating political means from a supposedly given and self-identical 'economic' end, the effects of definite social and political relations and practices as conditions for the existence and/or destruction of different forms of economic relations are elided. Beyond the banalities of calls for the 'participation of the working people and of their representatives ... (and) their access to the control centres of society' (Marchais, who considers this 'the key problem of the struggle for socialism') the PCF also completely fails to analyse the concrete forms of social and political power functioning within (and by) 'democratic' regimes themselves. Marchais' words recall Bentham's plan for the 'panopticon' in which 'access to the 'control centre' is positively welcomed and to be encouraged - a 'democratisation' of power relations which leaves their effects intact (1). The question of the possibility of a 'non-violent' transformation of social relations is not at stake here, nor yet questions concerning parliamentary and electoral strategies. What is at stake is the absence of any analysis of power; for the forms, effects and operations of social and political power are involved whatever strategy is adopted.

This central failure to examine the question of social and political power follows from the presentation of the question of strategy in terms of 'dictatorship' and 'democracy' as absolutes defining the field of political practice prior to an analysis of the social relations and practices upon which these political forms depend. This failure is essentially linked to two other implications of the PCF's 'choice' which can be cited here. Firstly, the absence of an analysis of the nature and effects of law, and the confinement of strategic options within the range of activities permitted according to possibilities sanctioned by legal representations. Secondly, the conception of the strategic objective as being socialism. Traditionally, socialism has been conceived by Marxists as the means of transition to communism, and not as an end it itself. Without resting on the authority of this 'tradition', we can nonetheless see that this change in objective has certain consequences. In conceiving socialism as the end to be achieved within the stable order of existing political and legal forms, and in retaining the juridical representation of these forms ('democracy' as an absolute, pluralism, popular will and representation, legality, etc.), the PCF is unable to raise the question of the relations of power between social forces, and their articulation on to class relations, within socialism itself. The question of the continued existence of 'class struggle' (for the PCF envisages the continued existence of classes and of their political 'representatives') simply vanishes, as also does the corollary of this - the question of 'socialist'

1 See M. Foucault, Discipline and Punish (1977) pp195-228

political relations as conditions for the process of continuing struggle within the objective of eliminating classes. The PCF's vision of 'socialism' would seem to be in danger of comprising less the negation of capitalist society than its apotheosis.

Balibar, of course, would see these implications as a direct consequence of the PCF's abandonment of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat', and in the light of such criticisms he proposes a return to the 'true' definition, to a 'correct, Marxist definition', as the indispensable starting point 'in the theoretical field'. This definition is obtained via Lenin who provides the 'elements' for a theory in the form of 3 arguments concerning (i) State power (ii) the State apparatus, and (iii) socialism and communism. All the problems of this 'Marxist theory' of the State and State power are already present in Balibar's statement of the first of these three 'arguments': 'State power is always the political power of a single class, which holds it in its capacity as the ruling class in society ... State power is held in an absolute way by the bourgeoisie, which does not share it with any other class...' (59)

The Class is King

State power, according to Lenin-Balibar, is the political power of a class. It is based on the relations of force between classes. It is specifically that political power which is held, possessed by a ruling class. It is a power wielded, used as an instrument by a class in order to maintain precisely those economic relations from which it derives its 'dominance' (or, alternatively, in order to destroy those economic relations to which it is subordinated). It is an absolute power in that it is prior to the law and 'above' it, and it is not shared (it is the power of a single class). It is, then, always a 'dictatorship' in that it determines the terms on which class relations are conducted, terms that are favourable to the class 'possessing' this power. It rests ultimately on force (violence, repression) although it cannot function by violence alone. Finally, it is the antagonistic nature of economic class relations which necessitates the existence of a 'special organ' of class power, i.e. as the necessary condition for the continued existence (or destruction) of these relations. It is the basis of the State in these same relations that explains both the class nature of state power and, therefore, the need of the proletariat for a state of 'its own' as the political instrument for the destruction of capitalist economic relations and the construction of communism. A state of its own, i.e. the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The two crucial terms to be analysed in this definition of State power are the notions of power as something that is possessed (and its correlate, power as instrument), and the notion of class as the subject possessing power: the mutual implication of possession and possessor. The PCF, in its conception of 'socialism', is guilty of a kind of economic reductionism; it remains to be seen whether Balibar escapes the reductionist temptation in his 'definition'.

The analysis of law and the state is useful in illustrating Balibar's conception of power. He correctly points out that the distinctions and categories internal to law (e.g. public/private) cannot be the basis for a characterization of the State. Although such categories may be necessary conditions for the functioning of certain forms of state, and although they have material effects in social practices and relations, the State itself cannot be conceived as having its source, or as owing its existence and nature to the apparently origin-less and absolute distinctions of juridical categories. As Balibar says, 'law is not an intangible absolute' which determines the existence of the State according to its universal prescriptions. Of course, this abstract-universalistic character of juridical categories works to dissimulate their conditions and 'source', to generate the appearance that (like philosophy) the law is 'its own source'. This is precisely one of the ways in which law functions and produces its effects.

According to Balibar, the law works through the imposition of rules and material constraints which regulate social practices. Its categories, however, have an abstract and universalistic character endowed by legal ideology with an absolute status and validity. It is a discourse addressed to abstract individuals and which does not 'recognize' the classes whose relations it thereby codifies and regulates (with the sanction of a force 'justified' by reference to the absolute status of its terms). Supposing that we accept this schematic characterization of law (and it can be criticized in many details), how are we to understand its operations in terms of State power? Balibar rightly rejects the illusion of an absolute validity and auto-justification of legal terms and distinctions. From his characterization of class rule as 'absolute', and his claim that (class) State power is 'above' the law, he is forced to seek the secret of law in its source and related function, i.e. as the instrument of a class in its 'dictatorship'. It is here that the problems emerge.

> State power can belong only to a single class just because its roots lie precisely in the antagonism between the classes, in the irreconcilable character of this antagonism. Or better: in the reproduction of the conditions of this antagonism (76/7)

and,

> the State results from the irreconcilable, antagonistic character of the class struggle, and is a tool of the ruling class in this struggle (77)

It is the simplicity of this 'just because', of this 'result', that we have to examine. It is undoubtedly true that certain legal and political forms may be necessary conditions for the existence of economic class relations, and it is no doubt possible to determine the effects of legal and political forms in maintaining (or transforming) these economic relations through the 'regulation' of relations between social forces. However, it is the extent to which this articulation of legal and political relations on to economic and other social relations can be reduced to the status of an instrumentality of a class that is in question.

Let us look at Balibar's image of power to pursue the implications that follow from the logic of his 'definition'. State power is the power of a class over another class which is derived from its (ultimately violent) imposition of a system of subjection-regulation realised in material institutions and practices (a special 'apparatus') which function by their determination of the forms of social practice through which classes are related. This power is unified by reference to its source (class relations of force) and its function (its 'ends' vis-a-vis class 'interest', or, more generally, the 'needs' of capitalism). This power of a class func-

tions both through 'institutionalized repression' and through 'ideology' (the ideology of a class). Pure physical force is insufficient, says Balibar, to maintain the relations of force between classes. Although Balibar is not unambiguous on this last point, it would seem fair to suppose that ideological forces are essentially supplementary to the ultimate sanction of state power, namely, violence. (As in the 'first instance' class power is an imposition, so, 'in the last instance' the reliance upon violence and physical repression will reveal itself. We return to this repression-ideology couple below.)

The central figure in this scenario is, of course, that of 'class'. How does it function in Balibar's 'definition'? Balibar recognizes (following Lenin) that anyone who dreams of a pure confrontation between essential economic categories - 'proletariat' on the one side, 'bourgeoisie' on the other - will never live to witness such a mythical event. Neither the 'proletariat' nor the 'bourgeoisie', as economic categories, ever appear 'in person' on the social stage (which is not to say that they do appear but in 'disguise'). The 'social forces' (Balibar) which engage in the social struggles and practices which construct social relations are irreducible to a 'class' which is the product of a solely economic determination. (This is relatively easy to acknowledge nowadays, usually with a gesture.) Such 'social forces' are formed on the basis of 'economic' and 'non-economic' conditions, for example, in definite political 'ideological' and economic organisations. If we refuse to reduce the conditions of existence of such organisation of 'social forces' to the status of effects of an essential economic class relation, what permits the identification of 'classes' with these organised 'social forces'? Such an identification is only possible on the basis of a denial of the alleged non-reductionism through a deduction of these 'non-economic' conditions from the 'economic' itself, i.e. as its necessary effects. (Whether this deduction takes place via the notion of essential 'class consciousness' and 'class interests', or via a teleology of 'functions' which arise from the 'needs of capitalism' is secondary here. Balibar flirts with all of these alternative means to establish his class identification-reduction).

Take the myth of 'imposition'. How far is it useful to conceive the process whereby a 'system of laws and legislation' is constructed as one of an imposition by a class? (To be fair, Balibar also talks in terms of an 'evolution', but even here are we to understand this process as governed by its end, which in turn is to be rooted in an essential 'class interest'?) Apart from the consideration that the 'social forces' involved in struggles for the construction of such a system are in no simple way identifiable with a bourgeois economic class, how is it possible to deduce the character of political and 'ideological' forms from the definition of an economic category of class? Of course it is simple enough to refer to 'non-economic' conditions of the existence of 'classes', but the problem remains of how these conditions are to be determined as having a class nature if their irreducibility to the 'economic' is maintained.

For example, to take just the categories and procedures of legal, political, philosophical, 'cultural' and other social discourses, their objects, forms of order, concepts, sites from which they are enunciated, conditions of effectivity, etc. Can these be reduced to the level of an 'expression' of a class, of its 'interests'? Can they be rigorously reduced

to the status of an 'ideology' of a class? Indeed, it seems inevitable that the notion of state power as an imposition by a class must proceed via the marsh of 'theories of ideology'. And at this point Balibar relies upon a confident expectation that the assertions which replace argument and demonstration will be read as self-evident. This is precisely one of those points in his discourse where the authority of an absent theory is called upon to do its work. However, this is not the place to interpret Balibar's 'Marxism' in its totality, and we need only note the 'difficulties' involved in escaping a reductionist and essentialist account of 'classes' and 'class struggle' (see RP 18 for a discussion of the logical structure of Althusser's and Balibar's earlier attempt at a non-reductionist account).

The dependence upon an (asserted) theory of class ideologies can be seen when Balibar discusses the 'relations of forces' upon which State power rests. He singles out in particular 'the relation of economic forces' and the 'relation of ideological forces'. The economic relation is already a relation of forces. The exclusive possession of the social means of production by a particular category of economic agents (a class) involves relations of the exercise of differential powers, e.g. concerning conditions of access to and use of the means of production by the non-possessors, powers of direction and of the control of the conditions of production, etc. These 'powers' certainly do arise from a form of 'possession'. But, they do so only in so far as this 'relation of economic forces' always already refers to other 'forces' which are its conditions, e.g. legal conditions of ownership and rights of disposal etc, 'ideological forces'. For Balibar these conditions comprise a 'relation of ideological forces' in which 'ideology' is disposed on the side of the bourgeoisie as its 'ideology' - imposed on the proletariat, to which the proletariat is subject, and in which it is 'held'. It is difficult to make sense of a notion of class possession here. (And, if it is difficult to conceive the possibility of a 'possession' of ideology, then may not the notion of a straightforward economic 'possession' - a kind of Rousseauean appropriation - become problematic in so far as it cannot be conceived outside of any ideolotical relation?) Balibar insists that the 'historical relation of forces between the classes can only be founded on the whole of the forms of the class struggle', but if the conditions

of these 'forms' are not merely the deducible effects of economic class relations, then nothing permits the identification of diverse 'social forces' formed on the basis of these conditions with classes - the notion of a class possession of power becomes problematic. On the other hand, if these 'forces' are deducible effects, then we are returned to a reductionism which makes Balibar's insistence redundant: we are returned to an essentialist conception of class struggle.

Theories of ideology involving the strict attribution of a class character appear to function as the inevitable handmaiden to theories of power as possession and violent imposition. A conception of a 'power' which appears to emerge at the frontiers between contending classes. This repression-ideology couple is central to Marxist conceptions of class power and the State (cf. Althusser's essay 'Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatus'). It would be interesting to consider how far this model remains within the horizon of Enlightenment criticisms of the absolute power of the monarch, i.e. the wielding of an absolute and arbitrary violence justified and maintained by the religious superstitions of the priests. In this scenario the marxist's 'ruling class' would be the modern occupants of the place of the King.

Perhaps, then, we should revise our vocabulary of power and cease to talk of power as a simple 'possession'. This notion is misleading if only 'just because' one cannot determine power relations as a function of an identifiable possessor. Which is not to say that power is not exercised within definite social relations crucially related to economic class relations. Clearly, different relations involve definite power-effects in the sense of differential powers and capacities exercised within these diverse social relations. But such an exercise of power is not reducible to the function of an agent and his 'interests' identifiable apart from the relations in which he is inscribed, and these relations are not reducible to any primitive 'class' relation. Perhaps we should say that 'power' as such does not exist, only power-effects of specific and diverse articulated relations of force.

The denial of a concept of state power as the instrumental political power of a single class is not a retreat to the notion of the State 'above society'. It is not even, if one likes, to deny the functioning of an 'economic imperative' at the level of the State. (But here again, it is interesting to observe the way that 'production' can become a 'categorical imperative' in the hands of a left 'in power', a moral injunction redolent with the virtues of 'discipline' and 'labour': can these 'ideological' forms and the power-effects they may sustain be class-reduced?) Finally, it is not to ignore the possible role the State has played in the unification of social relations into a regulated system. What this denial does refuse is to pre-judge the analysis of the forms of articulation of diverse relations between social forces. It refuses to seek the cause, unity and function of the State in a postulated unity of class-origin 'represented' with its 'interests' in all aspects and levels of social practice. It refuses to arrange all the forms of social power under the sign of a unified State power of a single 'ruling' class.

In this review I have concentrated almost exclusively on the fundamental question of State Power as the political power of a class. This emphasis is justified, I believe, on the grounds that this conception of power ultimately vitiates the many interesting things Balibar has to say on other questions, for example, his comments on the State apparatus and on the popular political forms and practices necessary for the successful transition to communism.

Balibar argues that it is a fundamental error to conceive of socialism as the goal of Marxist revolutionary struggle. To do this is to suggest that socialism is a stable mode of production and social order on a par with capitalism. But socialism, according to Balibar, has always been for Marxists no more than the 'first stage' of the struggle for communism, a 'transitional' form involving the objective of the eventual elimination of classes and so of the State and State power. Socialism can only be properly understood from this perspective of the struggle for communism. It is the objective of communism that should inform the social and political practice of socialism. Two different forms of argument are combined in this claim.

On the one hand Balibar presents a number of forceful arguments concerning the popular forms of mass practice and organisation necessary if communism is to be achieved and the State to 'wither away'. These arguments need to be taken very seriously and involve a neglected area of analysis concerning the conditions necessary for a continued transformation of social relations in a definite direction, i.e. the forms which social struggles take under socialist conditions.

But, on the other hand, this analysis is combined with a form of deductivism, and once again help is required from an absent theory to support assertions which take the place of arguments. Balibar deduces the nature of socialism as a transitional form of society in the process of transforming itself in the direction of communism. It is the postulation of a general historical 'tendency' (already present in capitalism) that makes possible the determination of the character of 'socialism' as the continuation of an essential 'class struggle' between bourgeoisie and proletariat. This 'tendential' determination makes possible the deduction of future social formations, and so also, the deduction of the inevitably class nature of the State as ('tendentially') either dictatorship of the proletariat, or, dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. 'Tendencies' play here the same role as that other handy bag of tricks: 'determination in the last instance'. They enable one to assert the governance of all social forms by a general law of determination and at the same time to suggest that the conditions necessary for 'realising' this 'tendency' are not given but need to be constructed by political practice (which logically implies that it need never be realised in fact) (2). Balibar's ultimately class reductionist conception enables him to determine the possible forms of future existence as deducible consequences from the essentially 'tendentially' determined character of 'classes', 'class struggle' and 'class power'. The effect of this is to theoretically undermine the positive considerations of the conditions of continued social transformation that Balibar argues must be constructed in order to eliminate class relations, i.e. the forms of popular practices and social organisation under socialism. The 'necessity' of these forms becomes less conditional upon strategically constructed objectives than upon what is required by theoretical deduction. It is this also which determines the class character of these constructions and of power as 'proletarian'.

2 See Cutler, Hindess, Hirst, Hussain, Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today, vol.1 (1977) pp105-34 for a discussion on the concept 'law of tendency'

Ghost writings

Lucien Goldmann, Towards a Sociology of the Novel London, Tavistock, 1977, 181pp, £2.96 pb
Terry Eagleton, Criticism and Ideology, London, NLB, 1976, 191pp, £4.95
Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, London, OUP, 1977, 217pp, £3.50

The area of study that generally goes under the name of the sociology of literature has been dominated for a long time by Marxist work, recently in one or another combination with structuralist or 'post structuralist' thinkers. Yet the distance between these texts is as great as that which can be found, in other areas, between Marxist and non-Marxist work. Each is representative of a different form of Marxist analysis - Goldmann of the Hegelianism of Lukacs, Eagleton of Althusser's 'structuralism', Williams of the distinct cultural humanism of the British left of the post-war period. If each were taken separately, a review would be a matter of criticising or defending Hegelian Marxism, Althusser's Marxism, or of discussing Williams' relationship to Marxism. The defects and insights of each are those of the theoretical framework employed.

Reading them in succession, however, attention is diverted to other issues; since they are all 'about' whatever it is we call 'literature' they construct collectively an object of analysis which seems to overflow each of them. They produce a peculiar dizziness: it is as if each explicitly or implicitly refutes the others, but at the same time produces its own inadequacies which call on the others for identification and rectification. There is a logic of absences which seems to lead in a never ending circle, each work appears as part of some ghostly whole yet to be discovered.

Goldmann is included here as Towards a Sociology of the Novel has now been published in paperback, two years after its initial translation and thirteen years after its original publication in French. The two theoretical chapters add little to what has been available in English for a long time, and sandwiched between them is a long study of Malraux's novels, a discussion of Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute, and a short piece on Robbe-Grillet's film L'Immortelle.

The way in which Goldmann attempts to analyse the novel is well known. The relation of literature to society is one of a 'rigorous homology' of structures rather than a reflection of content. The novel is the form appropriate to the story of the problematic individual engaging in a search for authentic values in a degraded and inauthentic society; the search is itself degraded and inauthentic, and doomed to failure. The novelist's problem is to 'concretise' an abstract and ethical ideal in the story of the search, and this cannot be achieved explicitly, but rather through the construction of form and through irony. The novelist's problem is the problem of action in a society dominated by commodity production, the central structural feature of which is commodity fetishism. The direct and 'healthy' relation between human action and its product, which centres on the use-value of the latter, is degraded and deformed by the dominance of exchange value in the market economy. Use-value continues to exert its influence but its action 'assumes an implicit character exactly like that of authentic values in the fictional world' (p8).

He presents a very general periodisation of history in terms of the stages of development of commodity production and matches this with an equally general classification of the novel form. The 'traditional' Marxist position relates the literary work to its social context through the consciousness of a group-subject; the best work is the most systematic and advanced articulation that that world-view can achieve. In the introductory essay, Goldmann argues that the development of monopoly capitalism destroys this mediation in that all groups, including the proletariat, which were previously a potential source of alternative values, are absorbed into the fetishised system. The mediating value - i.e. exchange value - has become an absolute value, and the novel now represents a generalised, unconceptualised social experience focussing on the problematic nature of individuality as such. It is the product of certain problematic individuals who have escaped absorption into the system, such as creators, writers and artists: apparently people write because they escape absorption and escape absorption because they write. In the concluding essay, Goldmann returns uncritically to the notion of the mediating group subject.

The critical studies in the work reveal a number of immediately identifiable deficiencies in his theoretical approach. To begin with, he seems unable to go beyond very general indications of parallels between a work and its context: for example, all that he seems able to say about Robbe-Grillet and Nathalie Sarraute is that they represent different stages in the development of monopoly capitalism. And, contrary to what he claims to be talking about, he seems to have little to say about the form or structure of novels and a lot to say about content. The 'structural' study of Malraux's novels is in fact an interpretation of events and characters which seems to reduce the work to the ethical/political commitments of its author - at its most crude, this novel is Stalinist, this one Trotskyist.

It would be tempting to list the sins of historicism, idealism etc and move on. However, Goldmann's own critique of structuralism, taken together with the way in which Eagleton talks about social structure, produces second thoughts. Eagleton sets out to analyse the relations between literature and the social formation in a systematic way, but it is not the case that he has an adequate concept of social structure and Goldmann an inadequate one, and that we can dismiss Goldmann in Eagleton's favour. In fact they share little but the word 'structure'. When Eagleton (or the structuralists criticised by Goldmann) use the term, they are referring to relations between positions in a synchronic system, relations between levels of the social formation, a causal complex. When Goldmann employs the term, he is referring to the relation between means and ends, intentions and results, a structure of action which is teleological and essentially temporal.

What this means is that we find in Goldmann's work the 'space', the requirement for the type of rigorous analysis that Eagleton attempts, but that Eagleton's analysis does not replace Goldmann's. The 'positive' aspect of Goldmann, the 'space' that he fills will not become apparent until we look at Raymond Williams' work; in the meantime we have gained a better understanding of his 'negative' aspect. He can only draw general parallels because he has no coherent concept of social structure which can relate different actions or practices in a concrete way; and he can only reproduce the author's commitments through his textual analyses because

he has nothing else to which he can relate the text directly but the author's commitments. Finally, he discusses content rather than form because he has no concept of form, only of action as it temporalises itself through the text, producing only very general formal necessities.

Eagleton's book begins with a discussion of the ideological nature of literary criticism and a critique of the work of Raymond Williams. The latter has already produced a response (from Anthony Barnett in New Left Review 98). The former argues that a criticism which sees itself as a sort of midwife, delivering a 'real meaning' from text to reader, is an ideological criticism. Marxist criticism, on the other hand, should aim to know the text 'as it cannot know itself'; it must reveal the conditions of existence and production of the text and the way in which it masks those conditions. This is a scientific criticism, the concepts for which Eagleton outlines in the following two chapters. Next comes an analysis of the work of a series of 19th- and 20th-century British writers in the context of what he sees as an ongoing crisis in bourgeois ideology. Like the first chapter, a version of this has appeared in New Left Review. The final chapter directly attacks the problem of aesthetic value.

The two central chapters outline the concepts which should enable the grasp of what Goldmann misses: specific 'concrete' links between the work and the social formation. The first, 'Categories for a Materialist Criticism', seems to me to fail on the ground of a certain conceptual incoherence; the second, 'Towards a Science of the Text', is the place where Eagleton produces his own 'lack'.

The 'Categories' begin with a definition of a 'Literary Mode of Production' (inevitably LMP), which in theory should be the central concept through which to grasp the literature/society relation, although he does not employ it in his own 'practical' criticism. The problem seems to be that it carries a considerable metaphorical value but little analytic value. It emphasises the material nature of literary production, the fact that it is carried on within specific social relations and that these relations, together with the object and means of labour, have a determinate effect on the final product. It is defined as 'a unity of certain forces and social relations of literary production in a particular social formation' (p45) but this definition seems to collapse when Eagleton employs the concept analytically. In practice he seems unable to define this 'unity', which presumably should distinguish one LMP from another; instead he uses various differentiating features including the means of labour (oral/written LMPs) and more general social relations (LMPs involving capitalist relations or the relations of petty commodity production). Indeed, the 'social relations of literary production' turn out to be either the social relations of the mode of production proper or the relations between writer and audience; and although the latter might be significant, if they are placed at the centre of the analysis we end up with a literary equivalent of marginalist economics. It would seem that the social relations of literary production are only a specific instance of the social relations of production proper, and it is no more useful, and equally confusing, to talk about an LMP as it would be to talk about a coal, or a bread mode of production. A mode of production is the basic level of the social formation and nothing else.

Following the LMP, Eagleton distinguishes a number of ideologies which are articulated with the social formation and which together comprise the raw materials of the production of the text. The problem here is that he offers no theoretical means of distinguishing between ideologies, rather he presents a list 'general', 'authorial' and 'aesthetic' distinguished according to area or bearer. The list is potentially arbitrary - sexual ideology, political ideology, class ideologies, status ideologies and so on; any cut-off point must be arbitrary. Similarly, in his analysis of 'real' ideologies he can only produce a list which takes over the normal terms of the history of ideas: romanticism, utilitarianism, liberalism. He is unable to question this classification. All in all, this chapter contains a useful ad hoc list of social phenomena which effect the production of literature, but it is presented as a conceptual analysis which it is not, and it leaves him open to the standard jibes about 'Marxist jargon'.

In 'Towards a Science of the Text', the text is seen as a production of ideologies in the same way that a dramatic performance is a production of the dramatic text. The act of production constitutes the ideology in such a way as to reveal something about the ideology's (or ideologies') relation to history. History or 'the real' does not enter the text directly as a reflection. Rather it produces certain crises within ideology, and the text, what we call fiction, is the attempt by ideology to overcome the crisis and render itself in a complete form; to achieve this it has to cut itself off from the real which it both reveals and hides. What becomes apparent in the text - thus distinguishing fiction from fact - is the signifying practice of the ideology that is trying to render itself. The literary text, then, is the product of an ideology or ideologies attempting to solve its internal problems, modes of signification working on themselves and thus making themselves apparent.

It is here that it is possible to distinguish the absence that Eagleton constructs for himself. If there is a 'crisis' in ideology, a lack of 'fit' between ideology and the real such that it no longer fulfils its function of masking contradictions, or if there is a contradiction revealed within ideology itself, then there is an area of existence which must overflow ideology: there is 'something' which ideology cannot account for or cover, otherwise there would be no need for the work it carries out on itself to produce literature. In other words, there must be an experience not embraced by ideology. Yet this is precisely what Eagleton will not allow: experience - in the form, for example, of Williams' concept of the 'structure of feeling' - is defined immediately as ideology. In the chapter on aesthetics, Eagleton argues that the most valuable literary text is that which in its production of ideology opens up the widest play of meanings, yet if there is no experience beyond ideology, ideology would satisfactorily confine the world within its meanings and the play of meanings would be impossible and unnecessary.

Paradoxically it is Williams who provides some indication of what is required to fill this space created by Eagleton's implication of an experience which overflows ideology. Marxism and Literature is notable as the attempt by a British socialist who, for most of his life, distanced himself from Marxism, to come to terms with and incorporate new and rediscovered Marxist traditions; of the three books under review, it is perhaps the one which shows most evidence of careful thinking. It is divided into three parts: the first a consideration of 'basic concepts' - culture, language, literature and ideology - the second concerned with cultural theory

and the third with literary theory. His position and his method of argument is predictably the opposite of Eagleton's. Whereas Eagleton attempts precise conceptual analysis, Williams is concerned with describing the changing meaning of terms in relation to their changing social context - the method of Keywords. He is concerned to develop a type of Marxist analysis that sheds rigidity and determinism. And it is precisely this concern which prohibits him from doing anything more than naming what is missing in Eagleton's analysis - a 'structure of feeling', a conception of experience.

The tendency in Williams' discussion of concepts and ideas is to dissolve everything which is fixed, determinate and determining into an ongoing social process, which is considered central to life and to literary analysis. A concept such as 'overdetermination', for example, might be 'effective' at an 'abstract level' but directs attention away from lived, practical experience: 'Any categorical objectification of determined or overdetermined structures is a repetition of the basic error of "economism" at a more serious level, since it now offers to subsume ... all lived, practical and unevenly formed and formative experience' (pp88-89). Whilst Williams' humanism is plain and unrelenting and - as far as this reviewer is concerned - essentially praiseworthy, he seems to do his cause a disservice. He steadily demolishes the means by which we can understand the absence of freedom, and such an understanding is necessary before it is possible to identify any genuine free or formative experience.

When he tries to draw distinctions in this ongoing social process of which we are all a part, it takes the form of a discussion of power relationships which appear to have no real basis beyond the will-power of those who hold power. Nor does he seem able to conceptualise the experience of the process as such; he can only point to the traces it leaves in changing meanings and literary forms. And these latter become unproblematic instruments through which the writer expresses his experience. This occurs most clearly in the critique of formalism and semiotics; he suggests that we replace the concept of 'sign', with its implications of determinate systems and rules, with that of notation: '... (which) are relationships expressed, offered, tested and amended in a whole social process, in which device, expression and the substance of expression are in the end inseparable' (pp171-2). Expression is the result of a production but the productive tools are stripped of their autonomy. In social analysis a similar stripping takes place: the independent materiality of social structures is dissolved in favour of an asserted materiality of 'practice' - which seems to mean only that our experiences are real experiences.

Williams' 'lack' consists in the fact that although he is able to talk about experience, he is unable to talk about that which is experienced. There is only experience - which may be dominant, residual or emergent, but such a classification seems to depend on nothing beyond the passing of time. And there is no real problem in the expression of experience, yet he presumably believes in the need for radical social change. From Williams we are led back to Eagleton and an attempt to theorise what is experienced, and to Goldmann. Whatever his inadequacies, Goldmann at least has some notion of a material world which has an independent existence which can dominate our activity and make both our experience and its expression problematic. The advantages of Williams' approach, beyond its emphatic insistence on lived experience as a balance to Eagleton's equally assertive dismissal, seems to be that his method can grasp certain complexities and dimensions of meaning that Eagleton's more precise conceptual argument misses. This is most apparent in his identification of the social origins of the notion of a separate aesthetic realm and his critique which effectively destroys it. In this case at least, he seems to be more of a Marxist than Eagleton.

However, the peculiar switchback produced by these three texts remains. Perhaps the most helpful conclusion is that if it is possible to identify absences, then we know what ought to be present. They enable the definition of a series of theoretical problems which go well beyond the study of literature. Neither together nor separately do they provide solutions.

Ian Craib

More about Western Marxism

Western Marxism: A Critical Reader, New Left Books, 350pp, £3.50 pb

This book is a collection of essays, the majority of which appeared originally in the New Left Review, 'designed to answer two needs: firstly, clear exposition of the major theoretical systems within the tradition of Western Marxism ... and secondly, critical assessment of these legacies'. This volume is best read together with Perry Anderson's Considerations on Western Marxism, which was, it seems, written as an extended introduction to it, and which provides a clear overview and interpretation of the tradition of Western Marxism. It should also be supplemented, as the book's editor points out, by two other New Left Review articles: Perry Anderson's 'The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci' (NLR 100) and Valentino Gerratana's 'Althusser and Stalinism' (NLR 101). These various items taken together do provide an extremely useful package of materials which should be of great value both for teaching purposes and as a stimulus for reflection on the Western Marxist tradition.

The essays collected together here are generally very good; they are clear and by and large avoid academic showmanship and obscurity (the exception to this is the essay by Glucksmann on Althusser). The overall evaluation of the tradition of Western Marxism which emerges from the book is a negative one (only Gramsci really escapes condemnation). The essays include two on Lukacs (by Gareth Stedman Jones and Michael Löwy). Then there is Göran Therborn's essay on the Frankfurt School, and this should certainly be read by all those leftish sociologists who are tempted to turn to Frankfurt for enlightenment (in the writings of the Frankfurt School, he argues, there is 'a double reduction of science and of politics to philosophy. The specificity of Marxism as a theory of social formations and its autonomy as a guide to political action are thereby simultaneously abolished'.) There is appended to Therborn's essay a timely 'Note on Habermas'; Habermas's popularity (again primarily among sociologists) might be less if it were realised that he represents, as Therborn says, an 'extraordinary amalgam of the Young Hegel and Talcott Parsons'.

The other essays in the book are on Gramsci (by John Merrington), on Sartre (by Andre Gorz and Ronald Aronson), and on Althusser (by Norman Geras and Andre Glucksmann). The book ends with

an interview with Lucio Colletti, a strange and enigmatic figure: his affection for David Hume and Karl Popper, and his empiricist, atomist ontology, seem to me to make it unlikely that he is the one who will lead us all out of the desert of Western Marxism. But his final contribution is excellent: it is a long declaration concerning the crisis from which Marxism is suffering, and it concisely recapitulates the central themes of his interviewer's Considerations on Western Marxism. The book ends with Colletti's judgement that 'the only way in which Marxism can be revived is if no more books like Marxism and Hegel are published, and instead books like Hilferding's Finance Capital and Luxembourg's Accumulation of Capital - or even Lenin's Imperialism, which was a popular brochure - are once again written. In short, either Marxism has the capacity - I certainly do not - to produce at that level, or it will survive merely as the foible of a few university professors. But in that case it will be well and truly dead'.

John Mepham

Poet, heal thyself

H M Enzensberger, Mausoleum, translated by J Neugroschel, Urizen Books (distributed by Pluto Press) £5.40 hc £2.70 pb

from 'Charles Babbage'

He hair-split pin-making into seven different parts:
drawing straightening pointing twisting heading
  tinning papering,
computing the wages expended in millionths of a
  penny.
A few stone's throws from Mr. Babbage's heart,
  a Communist
sat in the British Museum, checking the arithmetic
  and finding it correct.
It was a foggy evening. The mills and stores of
  industry
released a gentle, steady grating.

The great unfinished works: Das Kapital and the
  Analytical Engine.
Forty Victorian years. The first digital computer,
with no vacuum tubes, no transistor. Weighing
  fifty tons,
as big as a room, a gearwork of brass,
pewter, and steel, driven by springs and weights,
capable of any computation whatsoever, even of
  playing chess,
or composing sonatas, more than that: 'to simulate
  any process
which alters the mutual relation of two or more
  things.'

These poems are sub-titled 'Thirty-seven Ballads from the History of Progress'. Ballads they are not. But each one makes an exciting and complex traverse across the life and work of some known or unknown 'hero', who either helped or hindered - usually both - the onward march of the Victorians' favourite goddess. Dense with insights, historical reconstructions and realisations, they are written/translated with the same skill and humanity as they have been thought. Socialists and radicals of many different tendencies can all gain much, to assist our struggle against capitalism's ideologically motivated resistance to self-knowledge and self-understanding, from reading them. And, if necessary, from reading around them, till the reader understands allusive passages in the light of the same kind of historical knowledge as informed their composition. An index lists the names and dates of everyone mentioned or quoted or alluded to in the text. If that sounds too much like a textbook, well, firstly, the 'art' and wit of author and translator have seen to it that the poems are not hard to read just as they stand. But, secondly, don't we need poems we can learn from in this kind of way, as well as others more immediately evocative or flatly polemical?

Still, as one wry but lucid, severe but compassionate death-mask after another hung itself up in my mind, there were aspects of the book I disliked. Why was there a total absence of women, and of non-Europeans, from the roster of protagonists in this would-be perspective on the history of the world? Progress may be a male European goddess; but I could not accept the book's complete concession to prejudices still so dangerously alive.

Less serious, perhaps, was the annoying and fatuous bother of poems whose titles consist only of the initials of the protagonists, whose identity then has to be dug out of the index. I could not understand how any socialist poet could perpetrate such a heavy put-down on the reader, and one which is of course intensified in direct proportion to that reader's inexperience or lack of formal education.

I haven't read his earlier collection, Poems for People Who Don't Read Poems, but whatever Enzensberger may or may not have achieved there, the poems of Mausoleum seem directed mainly to male intellectuals. Devoted exclusively to their European forbears, it invites them to a verbal rite of parricide, ancestor-worship, and homosexual incest. Sometimes Mausoleum even feels suspiciously like what 'we' have all been waiting for, from Beach City to Katmandu, the talismanic BOOK which can at last sustain the widely-craved illusion that merely to read it is to act - when of course it is nothing of the kind. No wonder it has been lauded in the Listener and the Observer (and doubtless also in the New York Review of Books) as 'destructive, yet exhilarating', or as 'that source of energy we seek in history now to lighten the dark of the future' in a ghostly Europe from which 'power drained out ... generations ago'.

So if you can leave it alone, and good poetry is hard to resist, perhaps you should do so and walk out of the bookshop? My reviewer's thumb refuses to move either way out of an indecisive horizontal. On the one hand, there is something sinister, or at least depressing, about the irresponsibility of so fine a left-wing poet, disguised as the 'independence' which is the hallmark of the liberal intelligentsia against which he has elsewhere written so effectively. (Is this perhaps the Gorky of our time?)

On the other hand, perhaps the defects in Mausoleum are a moving example of the point which Enzensberger himself makes many times, in the course of his radical penetration into the entrails of capitalist science and culture, to the effect that capitalism stamps its deformities upon all creativity. Not only upon that of its own best servants, such as F W Taylor (pp120-2); but also upon that of its most gifted enemies, such as Enzensberger.

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