"An Obscure Scandal of Consciousness ...."

Reviewed by James Koehne


If the 1960s was a decade which held out the promise of an emergent hope for change, the ’seventies was the decade in which those possibilities were ruthlessly halted, or, more truthfully, overpowered by the forces resistant to change. Midway through the 1980s, we are becoming familiar with cynicism as the mental attitude for our times.

This demise of hope is strongly connected with the decline of marxism’s popular strength as a strategy for building a new and better society. Capitalism has dealt effectively — as ever — with the murmurings of change which rose to the surface around 1968 (in Paris, most notably, but in other places and ways as well). In the face of numerous international failures and remarkably efficient suppressions of socialist revolutions, the response of the intellectual left has been a thorough reinvestigation of marxist philosophy. One of the strongest philosophical currents to direct its attention to the reconsideration of marxism has been French structuralism and post-structuralism.

Perry Anderson’s critical examination In the Tracks of Historical Materialism considers the work in critical theory of writers like Foucault, Lacan, Derrida and Levi-Strauss as part of the retreat of socialist culture. At a time when the popularity of these writers and others in the same mould, like Jean Baudrillard, is on the increase in the Antipodes, Anderson’s consideration of the structuralist trend in philosophical thought is important for us.

Structuralist analysis — in whichever sphere of interest it may be directed — begins with the distinction between external structures (the real of “signs”) and the subjects of those structures (the “signified”), and proceeds to focus attention on the mechanisms and characteristics of “signs” and structures (the realm of “signs”) and analyses in this model have been produced, extending widely from the original application of structuralist theory as a method of linguistic study, to applications in music, literature, anthropology and, ultimately, social theory. The structuralist approach is dispassionate and rigorously eschews the influence of historical or personal context. Nothing is relevant but the structure, which seemingly never alters — in fact, it will defy all efforts for change. No wonder so many structuralist writers have ended up celebrating negation (Baudrillard) or become champions of conservatism.

Structuralism forgets, says Anderson, the most important element of any critical theory (particularly social theory) — the subject.

Anderson characterises the rise of structuralism as a retreat from commitment and struggle. Structuralism’s critique of marxism — in itself a laudable aim and a philosophical/political/practical necessity — fails because of its single-minded emphasis on the “signs” of capitalism (rather than the “subject”, which, after all, is where the oppression lies), and its failure to develop a renewed strategy for change. There is a limit, says Anderson, to the extent to which a language theory model can be applied to society. The result is a retreat from the program of socialism, concomitant with the growth of a broader “scandal of consciousness” which tolerates the status quo and legitimises a lack of commitment. As structuralism belatedly becomes trendy in Australia, the post-modernist, post-political “scandal of consciousness” threatens to establish a prevalence in our way of thinking.

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Far from having pursued an expansionist and adventurous foreign policy, Steele argues that the Soviet leaders have generally been cautious and conservative. In cases such as Ethiopia and Angola, where Soviet involvement has been portrayed by sections of the Western media as aggressive, the Soviet leaders had little to do with the original unfolding of events and only became involved following requests for assistance from internationally recognised regimes. The invasion of Afghanistan is an exception to this pattern but, in Steele's analysis, fits into the picture of a foreign policy based on the overriding objective of national security.

In Steele's view, there is no evidence for the existence of an expansionist dynamic to Soviet policy. Though striving for increased influence, this is something most major powers have in common, and Soviet initiatives are a priori no less legitimate than those of any other nation. There are examples of policies which seem to conform with the ideology of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, but there are also innumerable cases of unprincipled dealings with repressive regimes (Uganda, Turkey, Libya, and so on).

Steele's book covers many other aspects of Soviet policy as well as those referred to here. It is a thorough survey of Soviet policies in all major parts of the world. It's a readable book, devoid of abstractions and academic language. The reader might object to its empirical, matter-of-fact approach to international politics, which tends to underestimate those features of the Soviet system which set Soviet politics apart from those of other big powers. In particular, the importance of Marxist-Leninist ideology hardly figures at all in Steele's analysis. Nevertheless, The Limits of Soviet Power complements Fred Halliday's more analytical The Coming of the Second Cold War very well for an understanding of the global politics of the present time.

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Review of "In the Tracks of Historical Materialism" continued.

In place of the moral and strategic vacuity of structuralism (not the only example of the retreat of socialist culture, but probably the most influential), Anderson proposes a new path for marxist discourse. He sees the possibility for a relevant, renewed marxism in a discourse which accommodates elements of both a restored marxist utopianism (a tradition extending from William Morris and Saint-Simon to Herbert Marcuse and E.P. Thompson) and practical social analysis (represented by Raymond Williams). A continuing dialectic between these two streams will yield a strategy of promise and "practical hopes". The result will be closer to the critical theory of the Frankfurt School of Habermas, Marcuse, et al., whose critique evolved primarily at the philosophical level, as such failing to describe the strategic processes Anderson calls for. A key element of Anderson's prescription for marxist renewal lies in the description of a feasible socialist model which is faithful to all hopes for the liberation of society from advanced capitalism, and hence is not confused with Russian or Chinese models. For Anderson, the economic considerations of the new society are paramount, and he refers to Alec Nove's Economics of a Feasible Socialism as a basis for developing a functional economic strategy.

Anderson's appeal seeks to unite the causes which challenge advanced capitalism (the feminist and peace movements are crucial), under the common banner of the one hope for a new society: the path of historical materialism. It is a persuasive appeal to which those who feel the need for change should respond enthusiastically. It's a small book, but it may be that the program for fundamental social progress proposed by Anderson recaptures the brightest hope for our time.

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