

BOOK REVIEW

Göran Therborn. 2008. *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* London and New York: Verso. ISBN 978-1-84467-188-5. Hardcover: 30.00 CAD. Pages: 194.

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In the Introduction to this collection of three previously published essays, Göran Therborn proposes three toasts in celebration of Marx, first to the proponent of emancipatory reason and freedom from exploitation and oppression, second to the historical materialist approach that attends to the present as history and to the materiality of power, and third to Marx's 'dialectical openness in comprehending the contradictions and conflicts in social life' (ix). In the ensuing pages, however, Therborn falls short of fashioning an analysis of recent and contemporary left-wing theory and practice adequate to the second toast.

Therborn writes as a prominent left intellectual, for a left readership. The book is intended as 'a map and a compass' – an effort to grasp the 'seismic shift' between the 20th and the 21st centuries – a shift punctuated by China's turn to the market and the collapse of the Soviet system, which have cast doubt on both socialism and its chief integrative theory, Marxism.

At the outset, as he takes up the global politics of the 21st century Therborn strays significantly from the Marxist concern with the materiality of power, erecting an abstract schema of intersecting 'parameters' – states, markets, and social patterns – to depict the 'social space of modern politics' (4). In this schematization, which curiously resembles the pattern variables that undergirded Talcott Parsons's functionalist sociology, capitalism is a system of markets, social patterns and states, rather than a mode of production centred upon the capital/labour relation. This grand-theoretic strategy sacrifices material relationality, but enables Therborn, a master essayist, to embark upon the first of several omnibus surveys, in this case, of the changing global political landscape. Along the way, he defends a certain state centrality against exaggerated claims of globalization and registers, as a major (new) left success, the shift, in social patterning, from deference to irreverence; yet he also notes the decline of collectivist, class politics in favour of individualism, a process through

which 'the Marxian dialectic has lost most of its force' (34). On the next page, he aligns the World Social Forum with 'antimodernist protest' – an interpretation that fits his verdict on the Marxian dialectic better than it fits reality.

In another survey, Therborn reconnoiters world geopolitics, with each region claiming a few paragraphs. Although not without some keen insights, these passages, and in fact much of the book, suffer from a tendency to gloss and to stylize, which of course is inevitable as one tries to encapsulate, say, Southeast Asia in three short paragraphs (55). The resulting 'map' is, I think, of limited value analytically or strategically. Most egregiously, in his effort to differentiate the 21st from 20th centuries, Therborn misinterprets a central claim of historical materialism. He sees the neoliberal privatization of the world as a blow against the Marxist social dialectic of a cumulative contradiction between capitalism's socialization of the productive forces within a system of private appropriation. Marx never claimed that this contradiction would be manifested in a contest between state ownership and the 'private sector'. His point, operating at a deeper level ontologically, was that capitalism creates increasingly socialized, interdependent practices *within the commodity form*, the chief manifestation being the development, in his day, of the world market, not the social-democratic nanny-state. Despite this confusion and its deleterious effects on the analysis, Therborn offers an intriguing vision of 'trans-socialism' that retains the insight in his first toast to Marx and extends dialectics to gender and ethnic struggles while trumpeting a moral discourse of human rights and antiviolence and a commitment to universal pleasure.

In Chapter 2, the focus shifts to an assessment of Marxism as the critical theory and practice of a modernity caught between its emancipatory and exploitative moments. In a somewhat meandering essay, Therborn reviews the debates that fueled and surrounded the Frankfurt School and other genres of Western Marxism. He concludes with a defense of Marxism as an interpretation, critique and analysis of modernity that is unsurpassed, yet that paradoxically no longer seems to offer any ready solutions. In the circumstances, the task for theorists inspired by Marx 'will be to look at what is currently happening to the venerable couplet of the forces and relations of production on a global scale and their conflictual effects on social relations' (110).

The final essay bids farewell to dialectics (or does it?), with a survey of radical social theory in the 21st century North. Restricting discussion to 'the North' bolsters Therborn's thesis that the dialectic of capitalism is in

recession – the temptation is to read the decline of unions in Europe and North America as an historical verdict on the working class. Largely ignored are developments in South America. Therborn seems innocent of the influence of Marxist thinkers like Michael Lebowitz within the Bolivarian process, yet he recognizes in the Indigenous socialism of Evo Morales ‘a new trail for Marxism in the Andes’ (128). In attempting to unpack the Marxian dialectics of capitalist modernity, he resorts to another schema, complemented by a narrative that casts both postmodernism and neoliberalism as challengers to left-wing thought. The various responses are grouped eclectically under the rubrics of ‘Europe’s theological turn’ (Dubray, Badiou, Žižek, Hardt and Negri, Eagleton) and ‘American futurism’ (Jameson, Wright, Roemer, Harvey, Arrighi, Wallerstein). Among the trends are displacements of class (Laclau and Mouffe’s embrace of ‘antagonism’), exits from the state (the turn to civil society), the return of sexuality (queer theory), and the strengthening of critical political economy (Wallerstein, Glyn, Brenner). That the last of these seems to run counter to the first two evokes no reflections from the author.

The book’s closing passages catalogue contemporary left positions, again by constructing a two dimensional space in which Marxism and non-Marxism lie orthogonal to socialism and capitalism. Here, post-socialist Giddens jostles with social-democratic Korpi, post-Marxists Laclau and Mouffe, and neo-Marxists Žižek and Negri. Despite ‘a resilient [Marxist] left’ whose intellectual production surpasses that of the new left, Therborn discerns a permanent severing of the ‘classical Marxist triangle’ that linked politics, social science and philosophy. In the circumstances, the most adequate intellectual stance devolves to ‘a certain *defiant humility*’ (180).

As I have intimated, the book suffers from a travelogue approach to its subject matter that relies on serviceable yet superficial typologies. Therborn does not demonstrate the decline of the Marxian dialectic; nor is it clear that ‘the classical Marxist triangle’ ever existed as an accomplished reality, as distinct from a persistent challenge. But Therborn’s failure to attend even gesturally to another dialectic, grasped by ecological Marxists (Burkett, Foster, Harvey, Kovel, O’Connor, Nigel Smith etc.), is possibly the biggest lacunae of all in this engaging and thought-provoking book.