

After Marx and Spencer: The Global Culture

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The Symposium: Marxism in Australia was for this *Newsletter* reader a timely example of the conversations stimulated by the termination of the Cold War and now lately by the head-long rush of post-Marxist Soviet society to embrace the political and economic structures of the capitalist West. And not merely the structures; also the style. For the people, McDonald's have set up shop in Moscow; at the top, Gorbachev's staff will be trained in running the Presidential office by one of Bush's senior staffers. When the Soviet government announced the sale of 10,000 tanks to a British salvage firm, to earn foreign exchange, Washington's last ditch cold warriors were baffled by the devious motives behind *perestroika*.

The symposiasts did not pretend to exhaust their subject. The Marxism discussed is largely academic, and it is considered in isolation from formative events as well as from the interaction between academic Marxists and the CPA, the ALP, and other organisations. The relation of Marxism to current government initiatives is not assessed, nor is the future of Marxism queried. These observations are mentioned not to voice dissatisfaction but to indicate some of the topics likely to be pursued in the days ahead.

The view I wish to explore is that Marxism may now be entered in the rolls with the Three Sociologies (of Comte, Spencer, and Durkheim) as another nineteenth century attempt at a science of society. Each of these systems made permanent conceptual contributions to the social sciences, and they anticipated important societal developments. But they are light years from contemporary knowledge; and the character of contemporary capitalism differs significantly from the societies these thinkers observed. The posthumous existence of the *ancien régime* in the social sciences inhibits progress toward the construction of a global culture to which the present Australian government is committed. This is of concern to the government, as its tertiary education reforms indicate. I shall try to throw some light on this matter by contrasting the sociologies of Marx and Spencer with the dramatically changed conditions of the welfare state.

Although Spencer was certain that it could not be done, the welfare state has proved to be a durable mix of the freedom, order, and equality that was so often the touchstone of nineteenth century thinkers and politicians alike. The welfare state, Spencer believed, would spoil economic and social progress by jamming its competitive motor. He denounced the regressive economics that would protect vulnerable industries and the 'false philanthropy' that would provide for the minimal needs of all. 'Evolution,' he was fond of saying, 'produces good results by a process involving much pain and suffering. To mitigate this may be private virtue, but it should not be mitigated by state action, for the beneficial results of evolution will be thwarted'. He accordingly opposed the establishment of public

health services, diseases being numbered among the providential 'penalties Nature has attached to ignorance and imbecility'. Private associations for the promotion of welfare were also suspect. Of the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, he said that 'movements of this kind, begun with the best of objectives, are apt to degenerate into undue interference'.

Spencer was certain that individual liberty could not survive those engines of despotism required for the welfare state bureaucracies. No amount of civil service examinations, rigorously administered, would prevent bureaucracies from becoming the sinecures that they had always been. Nor could parliamentary legislation, however vigilantly guarded, prevent them gradually absorbing private liberty, as he believed was already happening. The Welfare State, so far from constituting social progress, was for Spencer a painful regression to the institutions of the *ancien régime*.

This sketch shows something of what is living and what is dead in Spencer's legacy. There were many arguments for the welfare state, but its enduring public legitimation has been acceptance that the state, as the agency of public will and dignity, has open-ended obligations to assist the less advantaged. This is certainly socialism of a kind (as Spencer insisted), so the welfare state is, doctrinally speaking, a hybrid of liberalism and socialism. Von Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* reiterated Spencer's arguments about the despotic tendency of bureaucratic socialism, complete with Spencer's failure to appreciate the vigor of countervailing forces—value pluralism sustained by consumer markets, the power pluralism of competing corporate interests, and the many institutions of electoral democracy. But the New Right (i.e., updated Spencer) arguments about the sclerotic effects of over-regulation identifies a phenomenon generally recognized today, not least of all in Eastern Europe.

The precocious young Marx and Engels effected passage through liberalism and socialism rapidly, arriving about the age of twenty-eight (for Marx) at the definitive communism based on historical materialism that they were to elucidate for the remainder of their days.

The speed of acquisition is not unprecedented. Newton had the concept of universal gravitation, and Descartes the concept of his method, at age twenty-three. However, that is science. In the less tractable territory of human affairs, thinkers are expected to ripen to at least Spencer's thirty-five years before giving birth to a complete system of human society. But the serendipity of the simultaneous discovery of historical materialism by Engels, the fashionability of communism, the belief that Hegel and the classical economists had captained the conceptual ship into the harbor, and above all Marx's spiritedness, combined to impart a tenacity to their thinking that made it resistant to the new knowledge and experience that unfolded in such abundance until Engels's death in 1895.

Like Spencer, Marx and Engels read the contest over socio-political paradigms as zero-sum; and like Spencer, their doctrine was embarrassed by the growing sense, around 1900, among liberals and socialists that the adversarial absolutism of polemics and barricades concealed numerous avenues of mutual accommodation.¹ This was, of course, a central

¹ It may be apposite to recall J.M. Keynes' opinion of *Das Kapital*. He felt about it the way he felt about the Koran; he knew that it was the Rock of Ages for many, but to himself it was disgusting. He remarked that 'its dreary, out-of-date, academic controversialism seems so

thesis of Comte's philosophy as it was also the persuasion of Tory socialists (Disraeli, Bismarck, T.R. Roosevelt, and virtually all crowned heads), who regarded *laissez-faire* as an irresponsible upstart extravagance. But it was a new wrinkle when doctrinaire liberals and socialists also began to appreciate the possibilities that were unfolding at a rapid rate. Two notable examples may be cited.

Late in life, the doctrinaire liberal J.S. Mill drew the conclusions from his long admiration for the Comte's philosophy and declared socialism (by which he understood Comtean community) to be superior to individualism as a moral and social ideal. But he did not renege on his commitment to parliamentary government; and his conviction that society should be dominated intellectually by 'the instructed classes' was in accord with Comte's idea of the dominance of the expert. On the other side of the ledger a leading theoretician of the self-styled Marxist SPD, Eduard Bernstein, published his revisionist *Presuppositions of Socialism* in 1899.² Bernstein pointed out the discrepancies between Marxist doctrine and existing conditions. Industrial labour was not becoming ever more miserable socially and impoverished economically; on the contrary, their unprecedented prosperity and freedoms showed every prospect of increase. The labour theory of value and the falling rate of profit, necessary conditions for the 'crisis' of capitalism, could not be argued amidst of the stupendous new burst of economic growth stemming from technological innovation in petrochemicals and electricity. Moreover, the middle classes were expanding in numbers, property, and influence while the working class was highly susceptible to the charms of Tory-led nationalism. Bernstein appealed to his comrades to abandon the postures of cataclysmic revolution and its crisis mentality and accept the evolutionary path through parliaments.

The SPD's response to Bernstein's revisionism confirmed what various observers had suspected. In an emotional session at the party congress, Karl Kautsky and other leaders reaffirmed irreconcilable class conflict and the destiny of the proletarian party to go its separate way in revolutionary struggle. Expressed in the religious language from which this contest was not far removed, Bernstein was an assimilationist Jew appealing to his more orthodox brothers to break bread with the Gentiles. But the SPD needed the bourgeoisie (despite their having no political power in the Reich) as the intransigent iniquity that made moral sense of the messianic revolutionary mission. Rallied to the true faith, the party congress cast out revisionism. Yet the issue would not go away. It was raised again by Lenin, who cast out the entire SPD because it would not espouse revolution at the expense of democratic forms and legality. And when the guns sounded in August 1914, Lenin's accusation read, the party of Marx forgot its international solidarity and became instantly nationalist.

Revisionism vs. Lenin's revolutionary vanguard concept is among the acid tests for the interpretation of Marxism. On the Revisionist view, Marxism loses its doctrinal distinctness and blends into the broad ferment of social change. On the Leninist view, it hardens to creed whose modus operandi, class struggle, spreads zero-sum oppositions between the Chosen and the Gentiles to all official acts and all private social relations. This mentality is indistinguishable from the bigotry of the wars of religion, which was opposed

extraordinarily unsuitable as material for the purpose'.

² Known as *Evolutionary Socialism* in its English translation, published in 1909.

only in its negative effects. I mean the gradual dissolution of the traditional community under the joint impact of enhanced technology and widening freedom.

In the nineteenth century, this phenomenon was manifest as the movement from the farm to the city. Rural statesmen-journalists such as William Cobbett (Marx's favorite English political commentator) reprobated this development, as did Engels in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Jeremiads of this kind made the squalor, brutalisation, and anomie of rapidly growing cities notorious. However, the squalor was due in part to want of sanitation and hygiene. A materialist solution involving engineering, medicine, and public expenditures fixed it. The demoralisation accompanying this change had little to do with factory labour; it stemmed instead from the disruption of the kinship affiliation and exchange systems, anchored in village life, that have been the firm earth of human sociability since our species commenced its existence.³ Voluntary associations (including workingmen's cooperatives) and churches supplied palliatives for this social depression. As welfare benefits increased in this century, dependency on voluntary associations and church membership decreased. The aggregate effect, as it worked itself out for over time, was that the social cohesion of kinsmen had little direct bearing on the weal and woe of individuals. Since the community and the extended family, together with the church, had been the police of morals and manners, and superintended marriage, the decline of their influence increased the latitude of individual choice. For the first time in human history, the sociability of many millions was 'secularized' by release from familial duty. The stage was set for radical individualism and its most significant expression, the sexual revolution. But that revolution could not arrive in all its force until contraceptive technologies and technologies for the control of venereal disease were available.

Inspection of last century's sociological radicalism concerning marriage, family, and reproduction does not indicate awareness of the significance of these changes, although radicalism itself may be symptomatic of them. In particular, the call for the abolition of the family followed as a mechanical afterthought to the abolition of *all* repressive institutions of civilised society and was uninformed by any experience of the social structure of human reproduction.⁴ Marx in 1844 deduced the community of wives from Hegelian logic and in 1848 answered the bourgeois outrage at the idea by adding the insult that the bourgeoisie had turned wives into prostitutes. This is belletrist sociology. Serious efforts to understand commenced in the last quarter of the century when human sexuality became an object of scientific investigation. The earliest published result was Darwin's

³ For an analysis of the British response to the factory system, see my *The Politics of Progress: The Origins and Development of the Commercial Republic 1600-1835* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988), pp. 530-554. On the decomposition of the extended family, see E.A. Wrigley and R.S. Schofield, *The Population History of England 1541-1871* (London: Edward Arnold, 1981); M.S. Teitelbaum, *The British Fertility Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); D. Thomson, 'I am not my father's keeper': Family and the elderly in nineteenth century England', *Law and History Review* 2 (1984), 265-286; R.M. Smith, 'Fertility, economics and household formation in England over three centuries', *Population and Development Review* 7 (1981), 595-622; and F.J. Ebling and D.M. Stoddart, eds., *Population Control and Social Behaviour* (London: Institute of Biology, 1987). An ecological theory of the relation of population is stated by Paul Colinvaux, *The Fates of Nations: A Biological Theory of History* (Penguin 1983).

⁴ Some utopian communities in America experimented with the community of wives. See Raymond Lee Muncy, *Sex and Marriage in Utopian Communities* (Penguin 1974).

consciousness. There is the legal uptake, the feminist uptake, and more. However, political thinkers are concerned with programmes and structures. Is there, in the midst of this confusing bustle, a programmatic 'sexual politics'? Can the structures of a sexually reformed society be discerned?

I'm afraid the answer must equivocate between Yes and No. On the No side, there isn't now, nor is the ever likely to be, an electoral party canvassing under a sexual politics banner. One reason is that the public agenda of complex societies cannot be subordinated to any one reform programme (as Marxist nations have painfully learned). The more integral reason is that any technology-based social agenda derives from the institutions of expertise, and the agenda must opportunely make use of innovations as they occur; hence the social agenda must be constantly rewritten. Furthermore, scientific and technical personnel typically shun party politics as vulgar; interest in the social agendas to which they contribute often goes no further than a taste for the fiction of C. P. Snow or Isaac Asimov.

On the Yes side, there are numerous special interest groups canvassing in the political arena for their sexual politics programmes. Feminists and their opponents are currently the most conspicuous, but there is a bevy of interests clustered around questions at issue in bioethics. World population control and resource management is another focus of special interests. All this is red-blooded politics. So is, in another mode, the profound changes in law and legal reasoning that have rationalised no-fault divorce, elective abortion, and wrongful life, to mention a few issues. There is also a series of programmatic statements sketching the outlook of the scientific successor to the ideologies of the last century. Let me attempt a précis.

The link with the past is the goal of realising man's good as a natural being. Rupture with it occurs when man is characterised as *Homo sapiens*, that is, as an evolved primate species occupying a variety of habitats in the global ecology: zoology replaces sociology as the basic science, and utopian imagination is disciplined by the environmental sciences. This initial epistemological radicalism sets the stage for a human science that generates discoveries about man, and which devises technological manipulations to improve human performance. When the discovery-manipulation-improvement process integral to Western science is applied to man himself, the idea of refashioning this creature and changing its circumstances presents itself as the obvious goal. When the complex natural causes that make the species are more exactly known, a eugenics agenda presents itself as the obvious means to the goal.

The agenda is conceived as a global concern for the environment, for health, and for the alleviation of poverty. Its vehicle is the United Nations and its subsidiary organisations, especially UNESCO and WHO, and all the relevant bureaucracies of participating nations. It promotes the concept of global culture through its statements on human rights, which it seeks to entrench in the national law of signatory nations, and by taking the lead in formulating global responses to global challenges. World population control has long been a major initiative; recently the 'sustainable growth' response to the endangered environment has emerged as the serious candidate for the promotion of world culture through world cooperation in a very tangible common mission to save the earth.⁷

⁷ See for example *Our Common Future* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1990) issued by the World Commission on Environment and Development, published in Australia by the

isn't too much scandal.⁸ This means that extension of the control of reproduction, selection by genetic screening, and the initiation of administered death are on the agenda. As for the latter, the euthanasia movement is its personal choice manifestation, while quality of life thinking provides experts the criteria for deciding which conditions of health constitute forfeiture of personhood.

Some observers have remarked on the irony that the *coup de grâce* to Australian Marxism has been administered by the ALP. The government's economic rationalism is an international government-corporate wisdom that owes little to local academics. Its emphasis on 'smart work' and technological innovation restores to public consciousness awareness that the major source of capitalisation is not labour but polytechnic rationality. Its encouragement of overseas investors undercuts jeremiads against foreign capital that are a mainstay of political economy. Its deregulation of banking, and willingness to accept high interest rates, encourages finance capitalism, which for the old ALP was the most exploitive of all. Its embrace of multiculturalism is another signature of the government's adherence to the United Nations agenda, one of whose incidental effects is to shunt aside the 'Australian identity' that provides the subtext of jeremiads against capitalist domination. Its willingness to sell venerable government corporations shocked the party faithful and signaled where the government's priorities lie when sentimental attachments compete with rational choice. Its university reforms have legitimated careerism and deprived the social critic of his prestige. Marxists played no significant role in maintaining the moral passion of the Eighties, sexual equality; the implementation of equality through law and bureaucracies was cut to international patterns, again with United Nations input. The totality concept essential to the emotions of emancipatory practice is no longer available. Indeed, the government has entrenched a competing totality concept into the public agenda—sustainable growth as stewardship of a threatened global environment. This too is drawn from the global political culture.

It is a measure of the need for reform of tertiary institutions that those of us who get paid to understand politics have scarcely recognised the formation of the global culture and the present Australian government's thorough-going commitment to it. As for Australian Marxism, the question is, can it survive the reformed ALP?

⁸ For an exposition of this logic as it applies in Australia, see *Trends in Biomedical Regulation*, ed. H. Caton (Butterworths, 1990), 75-80.