



PROJECT MUSE®

Why Marx Was Right by Terry Eagleton (review)

Philip Goldstein

symploke, Volume 22, Numbers 1-2, 2014, pp. 402-404 (Review)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

symploke
editor
Jeffrey S. Eklun

AUSTERITY

Volume 22 Numbers 1-2

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/566863>

for community would be appreciated by” those analyzing communicative practices (230). In “Self-control, Values, and Moral Development,” Helmut Pape suggests that Peirce’s idea that the “relationship between cognitive autonomy and moral status of being a person,” or the origin of self-control, leads to an agency that can be helpful in understanding what makes human intelligence different from artificial intelligence (151). Ahti-Veikko Pietarinen uses game theory to demonstrate that logic is rule-based and that a Peircean model is “cooperative rather than competitive” (184). This game-model helps to demonstrate the habits that allow for interpretation of signs in communication. Finally, in “Unassailable Belief and Ideal-Limit Opinion,” Mateusz W. Oleksy argues that Peirce’s consensualist theory of truth is helpful in understating how communities come to have “unassailable” beliefs. Each of these five essays show a clear way that Peircean philosophy can settle normative problems in other fields of inquiry beyond Peirce’s immediate subject matters.

As a reader, I find myself desiring further detail and explanation from many of these authors. The ideas they present need more flesh than an essay in a collection can provide. This, however, is by no means a criticism of the ideas presented—rather these essays have left me wanting more. Then again, if the Peircean norm demanding that we never block the road of inquiry is respected, I would say that the collection is successful as it demands *more* inquiry. The road of inquiry is open if we take the deeply normative character of Peirce seriously. More needs to be said, but this is an admirable opening dialogue from a diverse assemblage of scholars worthy of attention.

This work is not for the Peircean neophyte. The content of this work results from the discussion and presentations of a roundtable of scholars. Thus, the diversity of opinion and depth of expected understanding makes demands of the reader. The papers reflect the rigor and deep understanding of Peirce’s philosophy that a group of Peirce scholars would exercise during a roundtable on the theme of normativity in Peirce. Scholars who have some understanding of Peirce’s semiotics or synechism will find much to enjoy and many ideas worth exploring. Those interested in how to apply Peirce’s thought widely or to begin an inquiry in the ethical norms underlying Pragmatism will also be interested in this volume.

Justin Bell, *University of Houston – Victoria*

Terry Eagleton. *Why Marx Was Right*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2012. 272 pp.

In *Criticism and Ideology* (1978), which was one of Eagleton’s first books, he expounds the scientific Marxism of the French philosopher Louis Althusser.

In his new book, *Why Marx Was Right*, he has come full circle, defending a polemical faith in Marxism, or, rather, in Karl Marx.

It is not that Eagleton defends everything that Marx said. On the contrary, he grants that Marx got some things wrong. Unlike Nietzsche and Freud, Marx did not, for instance, recognize that power imposes domination for its own sake (209). It is that, in explaining Marx's views, Eagleton adopts a highly polemical tone. For example, speaking of how western manufacturing was outsourced to "cheap wage locations" in the third or "underdeveloped" world, he denounces the treatment of the "'peripheral' countries, which were, he says, "subjected to sweated labor, privatized facilities, slashed welfare, and surreally inequitable terms of trade" (4). One would expect him to provide the statistics or information supporting this claim, but that is not the point. Rather, Eagleton means to contrast the miseries of these countries with the well-being of western elites, so he adds that, while these countries suffered such miseries, "the bestubbed executives of the metropolitan nations tore off their ties, threw open their shirt necks, and worried about their employees' spiritual well-being" (4). The third world miseries are appropriately denounced, while the first world executives' well-being is appropriately and amusingly ridiculed. Such polemics can be amusing, even extraordinarily amusing. In arguing that Marx was not a utopian thinker, he notes, for example, that, while Fourier, a French utopian thinker who influenced Marx, believed that "in the future society the sea would turn into lemonade," "Marx himself would probably have preferred a fine Riesling" (68).

In this amusingly polemical manner, the book's ten chapters defend Marx's views, addressing and answering standard objections, such as Marxism's demise, its economic determinism, communism's failures, revolutionary violence, his reductive materialism, his utopian outlook, or race or gender's new importance. In the case of communism's failures, he grants that under Stalin the USSR turned into a brutal dictatorship but argues that it still provided many benefits, including education, social services, and employment. In the forceful, polemical manner, he adds that, when "freedom and democracy finally came" to the Soviet Union, they brought "economic shock therapy, a form of daylight robbery politely known as privatization, joblessness for tens of millions, stupendous increases in poverty and inequality" (14). He also argues that Marx expected socialism to be a revolutionary movement emerging in highly developed, western countries, not in a single country and certainly not in a backward country like Russia, whose poverty and history made a dictatorship more likely.

These defenses of Marx and of the USSR are forceful but well-known. So are his other arguments. For example, to answer charges of economic determinism, Eagleton grants that Marx considers the economic base primary. "Before we can do anything else, we need to eat and drink" (107). Marx does not, however, reduce the social and cultural institutions in the superstructure to the economic institutions forming the base; rather, as Engels insisted, he considered the superstructure relatively independent of the base. Eagleton

denies, however, that cultural institutions can oppose the economic base. "Most novelists, scholars, advertisers, newspapers, teachers, and television stations do not produce work that is dramatically subversive of the status quo" (114). This discussion involves Eagleton in interesting and informative discussions about the various ways in which scholars have explained historical change, which Marx rightly attributes, Eagleton says, to changing modes of production; however, Eagleton's claim that novelists, scholars, and others do not subvert the status quo seems too sweeping, since these figures and institutions can and do make important criticisms of the status quo even if they do not promote revolution or act "radically subversive."

In answering the charge that Marx's materialism is reductive, Eagleton also makes interesting but well-known arguments. He points out that Marx does not agree with the eighteenth century materialists, who treat the observer as a passive mirror of external conditions; on the contrary, he considers materialism an active practice in which one constructs the world which one experiences. This argument involves Eagleton in interesting discussions of the mind-body problem, which he considers a non-issue once you grant that humans are social beings involved with their bodies, and of Marx's spirituality, which, he says, involves "art, friendship, fun, compassion, laughter, sexual love, rebellion, creativity, sensuous delight, righteous anger, and abundance of life," not theology (140). He adds, however, that the views of Marx, who was an atheist but was raised Jewish, were informed by Judaism's "great themes," including "justice, emancipation, the reign of peace and plenty," and so on (157).

Eagleton devotes much of the last chapter to condemning postmodernism. He argues that the women's, black, and nationalist movements which postmodernists consider independent were firmly supported by Soviet as well as 1930s communism. More importantly, he treats post-colonialism, including the work of Edward Said, as a mere academic enterprise, and he faults postmodern theories for dismissing grand narratives like Marxism and for valuing culture over nature. He is right about postmodern theories, but his claim that Marx, by contrast, values nature and was even an environmentalist goes too far.

The one objection I would raise to Eagleton's amusing polemics in defense of Marx's views is that he ignores or denies the history or evolution of Marxism. His accounts of Marx's materialism or of the USSR's dilemma restate arguments made after 1917, when the Russian Revolution took place, or the 1930s, when Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* were first published. More importantly, he does not address the post-structuralist Marxism or PostMarxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, who advocated a modern coalition politics. Eagleton, by contrast, has little to say about modern politics except that communism was not so bad and that big or revolutionary changes can be good.