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O'LEARY, MARX AND ASIA

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Brendan O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Oriental Despotism, Historical Materialism and Indian History*. Foreword Ernest Gellner. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989, xvi + 394 pp., £35.00.

Karl Marx's great project was to produce a scientific theory of human salvation. His writings combined penetrating academic studies with highly emotional rhetoric. He had certainly mastered the art of stimulating passionate responses to his own texts. For more than a hundred years, humanity has been infested with obsessive condemnation and obsessive hero-worship of Karl Marx. Both denominations have shown extreme aptitude in twisting the words of the Arch-Demon or of The Holy Teacher. Of course, intellectual or emotional influence does not always stem from greatness. Moreover, being a great thinker does not mean being always right. Aristotle was a great thinker. Nevertheless, there are few Aristotelians today who would unconditionally accept Aristotle's physics or biology. Marx deserves appreciative and critical studies no less than Aristotle, Locke or Machiavelli. Cultural Bolshevism (one party rule within the intellectual community) can be transcended only if we try to avoid prejudging the case of Dr. Karl Marx.

There is a claim that Marx was right about mid-nineteenth century Western Europe but wrong about the world at large. This contention is an over-simplification. Marx might have been a Eurocentrist in the practical meaning of the word, but he was certainly aware of the possibility that his historical sociology might have had only local applicability (e.g., Marx 1881). He tried to ask questions and develop theories about other regions. What we have to ask is (1) are they stimulating valuable research programs? and (2) if they happen to be false empirically, has Marx then been falsified in the Popperian sense? One cannot logically preclude affirmative answers to both (1) and (2). Judgement on both issues belongs to the world of *a posteriori* empirical studies.

Marx designed an economics to justify the transition from capitalism to communism and to introduce his thoughts about communism itself. Alec Nove has (to my mind, successfully) argued that Marx's economic reasoning about the running of the communist society was as utopian and unfeasible as that of his socialist predecessors (Nove 1983). This leaves

the production of the economic case for socialism open to all newcomers. But Marx had also invented the historical sociology. He produced a research program for a new discipline and a paradigmatic example to embody the requirements of this program. Research programs can be fruitful or barren, paradigms can be right or wrong or just confused. A particular theory can be proven wrong, but this does not entail the necessary rejection of its paradigm and research program. If Marx is proved wrong on his particular theories but right on paradigm and research program, then *his* case for socialism would be decisively weakened, although his methods and insights in social research would remain profitable for academic studies. His writings would confirm to the Popperian criteria of scientificity. There would be a Hegelian transcension (negation of negation) of *Marxism*.

A religion can cope with enemies who denounce their prophet as Satan. It starts to encounter real troubles with the secularization of the Holy Fathers into intelligent but fallible human beings. O'Leary argues convincingly that a particular theory proposed by Marx was wrong. He puts forward a good case against the paradigmatic theory, and he is somewhat uncertain about the research program. Marx is pictured as an intelligent human being with many human failings (and this was, undoubtedly, the case).

Marx provides us with an obvious counterexample to the generalization that all German academic writings are dull. In this respect, Brendan O'Leary is comparable to Karl Marx. O'Leary combines passion with academic study, and academic study profits from O'Leary's style of writing. While some of Marx's texts read as if they were written for the *Private Eye*, O'Leary has profited from post-Wittgensteinian analytic philosophy. This has been the best tool produced so far for the purpose of the study of ideas (it becomes vacuous if turned upon itself or upon language divested of extra-linguistic purposes). O'Leary has succeeded in combining admirable clarity of writing with a natural ability to communicate his feelings, thus superbly substantiating that academics are human and ought not to be ashamed of being human and that serious ideas can be discussed in texts intended for humans and not only for highly logical subhuman machines.

A major virtue of the book under review is the introduction of solid scholarship into an area which has been for too long prone to sectarian disputes. O'Leary furnishes an account of the whole corpus of Marx's and Engels's writings relevant to his subject. He does justice to the history of the texts and, thus, allows for the evolution or change of views. He places the texts in their proper context and proper extratextual background. He rejects the idea of absolute coherence of Marx's views as a precondition of study. Any coherence has to be proved by discussion of evidence. Thus, the 1857-58 *Grundrisse* are given their proper place

not proclaimed to be the one and real authentic Marx. All Marx is authentic. Unfinished drafts cannot be assigned precedence over the published writing. Moreover, O'Leary accepts that (a) Engels was an independent writer and, nevertheless, (b) Engels has to be treated as a co-author of Marxism. Any study of Marx (after 1844) has to be a study of Marx and Engels.

O'Leary's argument is that the words 'Asiatic Mode of Production' (AMP) were not a substitute for the term 'Oriental Despotism'. Marx referred to a social order which certainly included a mode of production.

Even where the idea of the AMP overlaps with that of oriental despotism there are significant differences of emphasis and conceptual purpose (O'Leary 1989: 134).

Marx and Engels evidently thought of the AMP as the form of primitive communism, or as a form of primitive communism, or as a transitional order from primitive communism to class-divided societies, or as an independent social order. There have been some shifts in Marx's position between these four interpretations, but textual evidence is available to support all four (O'Leary 1989: 135). This is definitely not a case of absolute coherence. Moreover, Marx was undoubtedly a nineteenth-century writer, but given sources available to him, he was still highly selective and avoided evidence contrary to his own views, for example, in descriptions of Indian society which underlay his concept of the AMP (O'Leary 1989: 262-267).

O'Leary's achievement is not confined to his account of Marx and Engels on the AMP. He provides an interesting explication of the Marxian theory about the linkages between the relations and the forces of production. He shows that it is coherent for Marxists to portray at least all class-divided modes of production as inherently limited in their developmental capacities (O'Leary 1989: 180-181). This is a better exegesis of Marx's theories than that by Jon Elster who has asserted that the difference between capitalism and communism lies in the respective velocities of change in the levels of productive forces (Elster 1987: 258-260, 288-292). Elster assumes that (for a Marxist) the level of productive forces in a given mode of production has no upper boundaries, while O'Leary is right on insisting on those boundaries (O'Leary 1989: 180-181).

There is also a whole chapter on Marx's antecedents. Marx's writings on the AMP were more immediately indebted to the best known political economists of Victorian England than they were to the tradition of political theorizing inaugurated by Aristotle (O'Leary 1989: 81). Marx's most obvious rival on the AMP has been Karl Wittfogel. O'Leary advances a detailed criticism of Wittfogel's substitute for Marx's AMP and argues that Wittfogel combined flawed theoretical contentions with empirical deficiencies (O'Leary 1989: 235-261).

Real troubles for Marx and the Marxists, according to O'Leary, are both empirical and theoretical. Few societies can be identified with the AMP. Pre-conquest India was not a case of the AMP but of feudalism (in the Marxian meaning of the term). O'Leary claims that productivist Marxism is ambiguous and badly operationalizable. Structuralist Marxism provides a highly problematic reading of the concept of the mode of production. Mechanisms through which transitions of the modes of production occur remain obscure in structuralist accounts. Hegelian Marxism can be saved only by turning it into an unfalsifiable (and implausible) set of axioms. Such a turn is contrary to the avowed aim of Marxism to produce a science. The Asiatic Mode of Production seems to deserve its place in the intellectual graveyard of past theories. The King is certainly dead, his Kingdom has disintegrated, and the competing lineages have to face the fact that the throne has been relegated to a provincial museum. But not all is lost for the AMP.

Its periodic exhumation and interrogation prompts important questions about the nature of agrarian societies, and therefore teaches us something about the distinctiveness of our world (O'Leary 1989: 335).

The Orient was, indeed, somewhat different from the Occident and the differences in their respective features might be significant for explanations of the development or absence of capitalism, especially in comparative historical sociology (O'Leary 1989: 234). Marx was wrong but he somehow started a research program which has not yet exhausted itself. There is room for a Parliament without the King. While the majority of O'Leary's criticisms of Marx and the Marxists are brilliant, he overreaches himself in some cases. He opposes multilineal readings of Marx's theory of history on the grounds that they remove necessity from Marx's theory, converting it into redescription rather than explanation (O'Leary 1989: 175). This is a mistaken stance. To abandon unilinealism is to abandon Hegelian necessity. But multilinealism is compatible with causation and a quasi-Hempelism. Any sequence of the modes of production can be treated as an *explanandum*. The problematic of necessity is thus removed to the *explanans*. One encounters no notable difficulties in designing, for example, a formal description of the linkages between the forces and the relations of production compatible with the multilineal sequences of the modes of production (Loone 1992: 197). Multilinealism is incompatible with eschatology, but Marx abandoned eschatology in the latter half of eighteenth forties.

In any case, the topic of non-logical necessity is in a need for more sophisticated treatments. Available conceptual means are patently inadequate for the purpose of expressing practically interesting distinctions. Let us consider the following statement:

If A, then either B or C. (A)

What is necessary here is either B or C, although B in "then B" and C in "then C" can be treated as contingent.

Let us now consider the much-beloved example of throwing dice. Let X stand for "I throw a die", and Y stand for "I get a die with either 1 or 2 or 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 up". We write:

If X, then Y. (B)

Is statement (B) expressing non-logical necessity? In the case of throwing dice it is always true, and it cannot be otherwise. In the real world we do not get dice changing into cows while being thrown, although this possibility seems to have been suggested in some discussions about the implications of quantum physics. We get always only one of the six possibilities realized.

Statement (B) assumes there are only and only six possibilities. Theories about the real world are interesting just because they claim that not everything is possible (dice changing suddenly into cows), even if philosophers in the looking glass worlds assume otherwise. Multilineal Marxism can still remain non-vacuous and non-re-descriptive and even retain some necessity.

I have used the word 'necessity' up till now in the sense I believe is closer to the traditional usage by Marx than to some modern usage within some communities of professional philosophers. This procedure is justified by the reference to the central subject of our discussion, the thought of Karl Marx. For him, 'notwendig' and 'Notwendigkeit' had certainly extralogical relevance analogous to that of the expression 'laws of nature' (as distinct of 'law statements'). If one accepts that there are laws of nature, then one probably assumes that there is something outside his own thought which can be naively characterized by the expression 'non-logical necessity'. Marx, of course, asserted that there are societal laws in the same sense as there are natural laws, therefore the discussion of necessity and natural laws is applicable to the issue of necessity and (Marxian) societal laws.

In sophisticated treatments, some of the best analytic philosophers have argued that law statements are generalizations and that there is no necessity involved in natural laws (Mellor 1980). It is still reasonable to talk about deterministic and non-deterministic laws, about law statements involving real universals, chances, etc. (Mellor 1990). A Marx-compatible multilinealism is certainly explainable (even Hempel-explainable) by what can be designated *law-statements* by a Mellorian. If the concept of natural law can be explicated without recourse to natu-

ral necessity, then the objections by O'Leary to multilineality lose their force.¹

It is socialism and not *Notwendigkeit* that has some serious troubles with multilineality. If there are postcapitalist alternatives to socialism, then the arguments about there being unavoidable ('necessary') upper limits to development within capitalism are not sufficient to justify the desirability of socialism even for those exploited (in the Marxian sense) under capitalism. It might be interesting to discover how socialism could overcome troubles of this sort, if it is able to do this at all. But this (alongside with all forays into the metaphysics of necessity) lies outside the scope of the book under review.

It is unfortunate that O'Leary does not read either Russian or German. There are some good studies in the latter language about both the AMP and the Marxist discussions about the problem, and Russian-speaking authors have² made many contributions towards solving the issue. The Godelier reading of the superstructure (O'Leary 1989: 12-16) has been based on a late letter by Frederick Engels. The standard Soviet Marxist reading was that of the *A Contribution to the Critique of the Political Economy: Preface* and it was analogous to G. A. Cohen's use of basic Marxist terms. There were certainly more Marxist scholars in the former Soviet Empire than in all Western countries, therefore one is not allowed a claim that the Godelier reading is the standard one. By the way, English translations of even the Preface do not always preserve the actual terms used by Marx and O'Leary's arguments could have sometimes profited from checking with the German original, e.g. (O'Leary 1989: 105). O'Leary has certainly extracted everything present in these translations. Any further profitable study of Marx has from now on to depend on the original texts and transcend the present English tradition of quoting translations on issues of meaning and usage in Marx (or in any non-English texts).

¹ Although, obviously, *Mellor 1990* was not yet available to O'Leary at the time of writing his book, but *Mellor 1980* was already published. Connections between the concepts of natural necessity and natural law were indicated in accessible popular reference books, e.g. *A Dictionary 1983*.

² I do happen to sympathize with anybody claiming there are conceptual difficulties with the notion of the AMP, and have even tried to invent some ideas for the theory of something which could be named AMP but the results are at present available only in Estonian *Loone 1983: 69-70*. Obviously, it is not reasonable to expect neither O'Leary nor 99.9% of the authors dealing with the issue to know all languages. Most of what Marx wrote was in German, and a large part of writings claiming to be Marxist is in Russian, therefore these two languages (or, at least, German) have to belong to the intellectual equipment of anybody engaged in serious academic research about Karl Marx.

There are some flaws in O'Leary's arguments on the incompatibility of Marxist theories of the state and the concept of the AMP. He is right, given his own articulation of the concept of the AMP. This articulation is no more than one of the many possible Marx-interpretations which have been outlined by O'Leary himself. Given that the AMP is a variety of primitive communism, then there were no state and no classes. Given that the description of Indian society was wrong, as claimed by O'Leary (and he is probably right on the issue), there cannot be any problems.

The supposed inability of the AMP to achieve endogenous development, which supposedly provides an argument against Marx and the Marxists is another case of avoidance of some essential questions by O'Leary. A Marxist really needs to accept only that *if* the level of the forces of production surpasses a certain boundary, *then* the relations of production have to be changed. A unilineal theory of history is, indeed, refuted by the inability of the mode of production to reach its upper compatibility boundary between the forces and relations of production. The ascription of unilinealism to Marxism is just O'Leary's pet theory. Writings in Russian since nineteen sixties have intermittently dealt with the issue of inherent inability to develop, with applications primarily to the theory of slave-owning societies. In any case, an author who supports operationalizability should be careful with claims about inherent stagnation. Given two or more entities with different velocities of evolution, the first past the post can impose its solution on the other competitors and produce an appearance of their inherent stagnation even if the difference was no more than a few historical seconds.

Disputes on the AMP might not help us much in understanding why capitalism developed in Western Europe. This is O'Leary's question. Marx's question was, why did capitalism develop at all? There are other questions of legitimate interest to historians and historical sociologists. Did the economic and social system of Minoan Greece differ from that of Classical Greece of the 5th century BC? What are the typological similarities and differences between Maya societies, the Inca Empire, Ancient Egypt and Ancient Mesopotamia? Marx was wrong but discussions about the AMP suggest an exciting comparative research program for historical sociology. I am in full agreement with O'Leary's final verdict about the AMP:

Its periodic exhumation and interrogation prompts important questions about the nature of agrarian societies, and therefore teaches us something about the distinctiveness of our world (O'Leary 1989: 335).

There has been an overkill of Marxism and O'Leary has not quite succeeded in extracting himself from its rhetoric. Although the King is dead and some lineages are tainted by zealots and murderers, it is still reasonably possible that the best one of them — the productivist historical materialism — can be joined in marriage with a solid republican

family. Nevertheless, O'Leary has produced a book of superb scholarship, lucid and well-argued about history and validity of an idea which certainly merits to be studied. The argument about the Asiatic Mode of Production will never be quite the same as it was before O'Leary.

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