Eagleton on Marx

October 29, 2011

Review of *Why Marx Was Right* by Terry Eagleton
New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011, 258 pp., $25.00

Readers of New Politics have surely noticed that capitalism has not been doing too well lately and that is surely why Terry Eagleton has decided to make his contribution to a revival of Marxist thinking. Eagleton has been Britain's leading Marxist literary scholar but has now taken time out to look at Marxism as a whole. His framework is to look at ten different objections to Marxism and attempt to answer each one in turn. These include such matters as whether class analysis is still relevant, whether Marx was really a determinist, the use of violence, whether Marxism leads to Stalinism, whether Marx was a utopian. He is more successful in dealing with some of these issues than others, but his efforts overall could help get his readers to more seriously consider Marx's critique of capitalism, since Eagleton is attempting to reach a broader audience than readers of such journals as this.

Arguably the most pressing objection to Marxism is the fact that there are no readily recognizable socialist societies in the world today, more than a century and a half since Marx proclaimed the specter of communism haunting Europe in the Communist Manifesto. Even after Eagleton has argued that Marx was not a determinist, and that he saw the creation of socialism as voluntary act to be carried out in appropriately-advanced capitalist societies, more still needs to be said. Lenin identified Imperialism as "the highest [and final] stage of capitalism" in his 1915 pamphlet and Ernest Mandel published his *Late Capitalism* in 1975. If Mandel had lived long enough perhaps he would have published a volume on "later capitalism." But it is hard to escape from the idea that capitalism has had much greater staying power than Marx anticipated, and that this should have made Eagleton a little more cautious in acquitting Marx of the issue of misjudging the system and its ability to adapt over a long period of time.

Closely related to this is the problem of Marxism being brought to the wrong countries at the wrong time. Eagleton strongly asserts that when you bring Marxism to a country with insufficient material resources you get Stalinism. What do you do when this happens repetitively? After Stalin in Russia you get Mao in China and even Pol Pot, and it never seems to land in the "right" places, and there aren't even any mass movements favoring it anymore. Much of the working class has lost interest in socialism and significant numbers of workers even support conservative parties. Eagleton makes it clear that he still sees class as the most salient form of social division but its reassertion on a theoretical basis is hardly a substitute for a working class movement asserting itself "for itself."

Following Isaac Deutscher and Trotsky Eagleton is loath to attribute much responsibility to the Bolsheviks for the rise of what is conveniently called Stalinism. Beyond that he refers to Castro as a socialist revolutionary and to muddy the water still further mistakenly identifies Rosa Luxemburg as a Bolshevik. He is also much too quick to attribute a positive sense of "solidarity" to the eastern European "socialist" countries. After praising East Germany for having "one of the finest child care systems in the world" and commenting on the negative aspects of post-Soviet shock therapy, and the losses in women's rights and social welfare programs, he produces a peculiarly tame summary statement: "Even so, the gains of Communism scarcely outweigh the losses." In dealing with Stalinism perhaps this literary scholar needed to make use of his familiarity with Joseph Conrad's concept of "the horror."

To reassert itself as a movement socialism must overcome the mantra that sprung from the

movements focused around 1989 that overthrew the “socialist” societies of eastern Europe: “no more experiments.” These were based on the widely held notion that only capitalism works. Now, in 2011, we are strongly reminded that sometimes it doesn’t.

Having the president called a socialist by even semi-sane conservatives like columnist Charles Krauthammer could help to open up a discussion of what socialism is and is not but so far not much has happened. Perhaps Eagleton’s book, whatever its faults, could contribute to an examination of why Obama has been grievously mislabeled and whether there are in fact analyses that go beyond the bipartisan Goldman Sachs consensus.

Eagleton eschews too dry a tone and uses his erudition to suggest that socialist media would ban nothing but Schoenberg and Racine. He further livens his book up with such comments as that the philandering Engels, “eager to achieve a dialectical unity of theory and practice, zealously adopted” the Manifesto’s assault on the middle-class family “in his private life.”

Eagleton is at his best when he declares that a “virulent form of utopianism has indeed afflicted the modern age, but its name is not Marxism. It is the crazed notion that a single global system known as the free market can impose itself on the most diverse cultures and economies and cure all their ills.” Marx was indeed a utopian if that meant he saw a future vastly improved over the present and with material scarcity abolished. But this is actually possible given the world’s resources. It is only “politics that stands in our way.” Eagleton’s final challenge to the Left is to change these politics by offering a workable and liberating socialist alternative to capitalism, an effort only partially aided by this volume.

Jack Stuart is Professor of History Emeritus, California State University, Long Beach, who lives in Minneapolis.