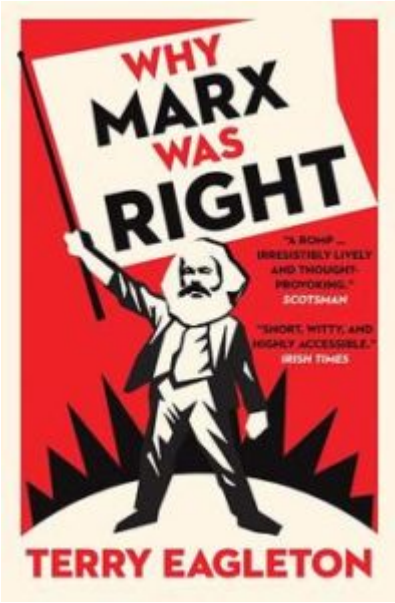
Discrediting Charges of Authoritarianism and Violence-Worship in Marx's Worldview

written by Michael Hirsch | May 30, 2019



This blog post is based on a presentation on chapters 2 and 8 of Terry Eagleton's Why Marx Was Right *to the Lower Manhattan DSA Branch Political Education meeting, May 14, 2019.*

Milton Berle, the 1950s television comic superstar, had a saying: "If it's not on the page, it's not on the stage." There was a time when I could give stem-winding speeches sans script: those times are gone, so I'll do this Uncle Miltie's way.

Terry Eagleton crushes ten common arguments against Marx and Marxism; we'll look at just two of them tonight. These are, first, that Marxism fails in practice because every regime claiming a Marxist pedigree has been both authoritarian and an economic disaster. Second, the mantra that the left's quest for an egalitarian, classless society by nature requires a violent uprising against what is still widely assumed to be a "free world" and where armed struggle at the service of a partisan class interest is the socialists' main and horrific remedy for ending the glories of "free enterprise" and individual economic mobility.

Over the next several weeks we'll highlight and take down other bourgeois criticisms of Marx's radical critique of "capitalism," a term that was only coined around the time of the 1848 revolutions, themselves political upheavals that collapsed in a host of European countries. Called "the turning point that failed to turn," the defeats coincided with an industrial revolution advancing and a bourgeoisie lording over its laboring masses.

With Eagleton, we aim to show up the arguments of Marx's critics as puerile, themselves ideological justifications for existing power relations and a serious misreading of its own bourgeois revolutionary history. But I'd urge you to read the whole book, which is a wonder in its capacity to debunk anti-socialist caricatures not only sharply and exhaustively but with grace and humor, too. As one reviewer put it following its publication in 2011, "This book provides a formidable compendium that will be a useful reference for any socialist…At [its heart] is a simple but urgent truth: we need Marx more than ever before."

For Eagleton, “Marxism is a critique of capitalism—the most searching, rigorous, comprehensive critique of its kind ever to be launched.” Marx’s critics, Eagleton says “accuse him of being outdated, even as they “champion a capitalism rapidly reverting to Victorian levels of inequality.” What Marx focused on is not so much what a post-capitalist, post-scarcity society would look like—such is impossible to sketch in detail—except to say it will look nothing like a proto-slave-state of the Stalin era USSR. His focus was on what capitalism “bloody in fang and claw” allows, what it disallows and what its own corrosive internal logic leads to. Marx’s proper subject was how the conflict or contradiction between the growing socialization of the mode of production—now a world-straddling system—and its resulting alienation and exploitation of labor harms growing numbers of working-class people, potentially creating not just passive victims but a political response from its own active gravediggers.

Modern capitalism’s high priests in the media and education extol “free enterprise” and individual economic mobility. They do so regardless of boom and bust in the economy even as disparities between rich and poor grow exponentially on a national and world scale. Marx, on the contrary, stressed the reality of class interests and class struggle as signposts of the system. Capitalism was his subject, socialism the popular resolution of the conflict inherent in capitalism. Rosa Luxemburg added a caveat: the future was a choice of either socialism or barbarism. Since World War II, with the advent of nuclear weapons and the real possibility of an environmental collapse leading to a sixth extinction, we 21st century humans have a good idea of what barbarism (or worse) may look like.

A branch comrade wrote me that he couldn’t attend today’s session but wanted to share with me his thoughts on tonight’s reading. He wrote in part:

“Instead of being overly defensive of the past (but also not disavowing it altogether), we should first offer a materialist explanation of why things happened the way they happened; and second, offer a path to socialism in the 21st century that’s more thoughtful and articulate than the Leninist impulse to say “we just need to overthrow this whole thing” as that’s not conducive to organizing. Whether or not there will be a rupture, we should be clear that we want to make structural changes to our economic system in the here and now and that doesn’t necessitate violence.

There has never been a revolutionary rupture in a bourgeois democracy, and it’s unlikely that we’ll see one soon. But we also need the Berniecrats to pick up a methodology to get a longer view of social liberation (one might call this Marxism).”

The comrade’s mandate could cover a life’s work, not just one session on two chapters of a solitary book. Let me deal with a bit of his.

To be fair, Leninists don’t say “we just need to overthrow this whole thing” any more than do reformists say “all that is possible is gradual improvement over the slow course of centuries.” Both statements are more akin to bumper stickers, though that is often how arguments run over beers. What is at stake is differing views on the nature of the state and the role of a radical political party. That is something Eagleton touches on in conceding that Leninism and the “vanguard party” fit the needs of a movement in a backward, authoritarian country but not easily applicable to a western capitalist state with a sizably enfranchised working class, relatively high levels of consumption and a common if repressive bourgeois culture. I’d argue that the vanguard party concept is more flexible than either most Leninists or their critics would have it, and also that in its early instances in the Soviet Union and elsewhere before the Stalinization of the international Communist movement was not only innovative but democratic. But that’s another discussion for another time. Just know that a healthy party requires a healthy movement (one that at least knows the difference between the fight for reforms and “reformism”), a movement that operates not only electorally but substantively as an

extraparliamentary force as well. Absent either a party or a real movement of the class, the other dies on the vine.

Socialists certainly since Marx's time never assumed they would be building a classless society in an industrially backward country, where as much as 90 percent of the populations were rural peasants or various degrees of landowners.

If building socialism in largely agricultural Russia was at first a long shot, it was made nearly impossible by the ravages of World War I, the civil war that followed the world war, and the invasion by foreign armies—included those from Britain and the U.S.—to overthrow the new government. Add to that the failure of revolutions in the West to come to the aid of Russia—particularly in Germany, where the left was a growing force and numerous cities weathered general strikes, only to be undone by the right-wing socialist government and its ex-military allies. The result for Russia was as Eagleton says:

"Building up an economy from very low levels is a backbreaking task. It is unlikely that men and women will freely submit to the hardships it involves. So unless this project is executed gradually, under democratic control and in accordance with socialist values, an authoritarian state may step in and force its citizens to do what they are reluctant to undertake voluntarily. The militarization of labor in Bolshevik Russia is a case in point. The result, in a grisly irony, will be to undermine the political superstructure of socialism (popular democracy, general self-government) in the very attempt to build up its economic base. It would be like being invited to a party only to discover that you had not only to bake the cakes and brew the beer but to dig the foundations and lay the floorboards. There wouldn't be much time to enjoy yourself…It is not that the building of socialism cannot be begun in deprived conditions. It is that without material resources it would tend to twist into the monstrous caricature of socialism known as Stalinism."

Now—what about the issue of violence?

As Eagleton makes clear, battling for structural changes in the here and now does not of necessity entail violence, but the push-back against those changes by the ruling class and its permanent government elite is itself often homicidal, based less on real threats than on perceived ones.

For example, the nonviolent strike of the American Railway Union in 1894, led by Eugene Debs, was violently crushed by the U.S. Army under orders from Democratic Party President Grover Cleveland. The use of federal troops as strike breakers was made under the false claim that it was protecting the distribution of the U.S. mail, when in fact mail delivery was not being restricted, only passenger service. The attacks anticipated what an insurgent underclass might do, rather than what it was prepared to do, or did.

At other times armed deputies murdered copper miners and their families at a peaceful encampment in Colorado in 1914. American Legion thugs under the watchful eyes of local police raided Socialist Party meetings after the armistice of 1919. The response of Southern racists to the nonviolent integration sit-ins of the 1960s was murderous, often done by police.

Who can forget the Nixon administration and Henry Kissinger's complicity in the murder of Chile's Salvador Allende and the crushing of his moderate social democratic government? Let's not turn a blind eye to the slaughter in 1871 of the Paris communards by the forces of order either.

Add the efforts of the CIA to assassinate Fidel Castro following the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, orchestrated by the Kennedy Brothers (as we now know thanks to research by reporter Seymour Hersh), along with the CIA's success in murdering both Vietnam's failing U.S. stooge Diem and the

Congo's anti-imperialist Lumumba, and it should be clear that violence is the option the ruling class takes when needs must. Often, it's not even the last option, just the most convenient. They do it because they can.

By comparison, left violence is scanty, reserved for the occasional anarchist incident, defended as "the propaganda of the deed" and exemplified in the classic line of a French anarchist justifying why he bombed a crèche serving upper class children. He said because "the bourgeoisie are never innocent." Then there were the brief adventurist infatuations of the Weathermen in the U.S. or the Baider-Meinhoff Gang in Germany some 50 years ago. Hardly a tradition, let alone something we Marxists need to take responsibility for.

And where the left has used force, its reasons are justifiable and need no excuses. In Britain, the battle of Cable Street in 1936 in East London was a clash between a broad section of the left, including Jewish workers, against a provocative march by the British Union of Fascists into the Jewish area. The fascists, soon routed, were at first protected by the police, and hundreds of counter demonstrators were brutalized by baton-wielding, horse-riding peelers. It is one of a number of international examples of working-class physical resistance to fascism, though rare in terms of left practice and nothing to apologize for. Eagleton doesn't mention it. I think he should, and proudly.

But what he does mention is worth knowing. He uses history to make the point that revolution and the resort to insurrection is hardly a tenet of the left alone. Eagleton notes how the British to this day don't regret the violence of their own 17th century uprising. They barely acknowledge it as anything but heroic. As he writes:

"Successful revolutions are those which end up erasing all traces of themselves. In doing so, they make the situation they struggle to bring about entirely natural. In this they are a bit like childbirth. To operate as normal human beings, we have to forget the endless anguish and terror of our birth. Origins are usually traumatic whether as individuals or political states. Marx reminds us in *Capital* that the modern British state built on the intensive exploitation of peasants-turned-proletarians came into existence dripping blood and dirt from every pour. This is one reason why he would have been horrified to observe Stalin's forced urbanization of the Russian peasantry. Most political states came about through revolution, invasion, occupation, usurpation or in the case of societies like the United States, extermination. Successful states are those that have managed to wipe this bloody history from the minds of their citizens. States whose unjust origins are too recent for this to be possible—Israel and Ireland for example—are likely to be plagued with political conflict…So would it not be more honest to come clean and confess that it is socialist revolution one objects to, not revolution itself?"

There is one point I wish Eagleton were sharper on, perhaps because it so bedevils strategic thinking in the United States. It deals with what constitutes class unity, expressed well in Kim Moody's essay *The Rank and File Strategy*, which has become a key text for the DSA Labor Branch, DSA's Labor Commission and for those of us who see union organizing and workplace agitation by socialists as key to our work. Moody writes:

We want to make it clear that we do not proceed from some faceless, raceless, neutered idea of the working class. We endorse the thoughts of the Caribbean revolutionary Aimé Césaire who rejected the crude Stalinist version of class "universality" held by the French Communist Party when he resigned in 1955. In his resignation letter he wrote, "I have a different idea of a universal. It is a universal rich with all that is particular, rich with all the particularities there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all." Nowhere does diversity shape the particularities of the working class more than in the U.S. Nowhere is this diversity more central to the divisions, diversions, and strengths experienced by working-class people in different ways. Nowhere do

working-class people see themselves and one another in such different, usually distorted, ways.

Picking up from this, a recent essay by a Suffolk County DSA activist, writing under the aegis of *Build*, one more of the numerous up-sprung DSA caucuses I honestly know little about, nevertheless argued something interesting in this light.

The author called for what he termed “unity in diversity,” or “unifying the working class through particulars.” He writes

“This unity in diversity cannot be accomplished through the universalism of *class-only* demands, but only through the true universalism of *full-class* demands. Whereas class-only demands seek flat solutions to the problems of working-class life, full-class demands understand that to fully express the needs of the total working class, particular needs must be addressed. *Organizing at the intersection of multiple burdens within the working class is of supreme importance for a full-class politics*.

…The more effective at unifying the working class across and through particulars, the more likely that socialists can actually produce a universal working class capable of defeating capitalism. There cannot be a world of “proletarians and capitalists” if the proletarians are divided by social domination and bigotry. There can be no papering over of these divisions either. They are not merely ideas in our minds, but matters of material.”

I don’t cite this as evidence that we ought to sign up for this new caucus willy-nilly or accept any variant of identity politics without reservation. Taking this argument at face value also doesn’t allow a free ride for masking or encouraging careerist opportunism, as for instance the wannabe Democratic Party leader in my neighborhood who smoked like a furnace all her life while loudly proclaiming smokers’ rights. The moment she was diagnosed with emphysema she demanded slating on her party’s delegate list as a differentially abled person.

Putting such personally enriching ploys aside, the notion of an expanded vision of organizing all parts of the working class on their particulars is a telling point, worth exploring at length and something missing even in discussions of intersectionality, which are often framed in non-class terms.

Remember, too, that we face an uncertain and highly problematic future. What Italian revolutionary Antonio Gramsci wrote so presciently from his prison cell some 90 years ago is still true and haunting, that “The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.”

Morbid times or not, it’s good to have a mentor such as Eagleton among us. Those of you who did the reading know how good is his work on Marx. And if you haven’t read it yet, you are in for a treat.