

The world is full of dead hedgehogs - On ideology for Kevin Harris

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ABSTRACT

Like a lot of other academics on the left I've bitten my tongue and let Kevin Harris (1982) do his thing in peace for some time now. After all, there are others, like Ivan Snook (1982), who can deal with his errors no less well than we can. I'd let it be even now but I'm becoming embarrassed. It is simply not true that Harris's position represents the most advanced thinking on the Marxist theory of ideology.

Like a lot of other academics on the left I've bitten my tongue and let Kevin Harris (1982) do his thing in peace for some time now. After all, there are others, like Ivan Snook (1982), who can deal with his errors no less well than we can. I'd let it be even now but I'm becoming embarrassed. It is simply not true that Harris's position represents the most advanced thinking on the Marxist theory of ideology. I'll not say that he is attempting to put back the debate twenty years - how about ten? but he seems strangely unaware that the most influential position in contemporary academic Marxism is the theoretical realism advanced by Keat and Urry (1975), Benton (1977), Bhasker (1978), Urry (1981), Keat (1982) and (although he does not write as a Marxist or as a spokesman for realism) Lukes (1982) which demands (i) a correspondence theory of truth, (ii) knowledge of a common world only minimally necessarily affected by pretheorised perception and (iii) a rejection of the normative character of epistemology. Harris, of course, will have none of this and argues directly against the Marxist tradition of Lenin's *Materialism and Empirico-Criticism* for a now no longer contemporary, and outside Sydney no longer fashionable, anarcho-socialist relativism. This is really my sticking point. There will be readers of *Access* in New Zealand who know less about contemporary Marxist thought than Harris does and they might well think that this is what Marxists now believe. According to Renwick (1983) I am a 'disciple' of Marx and they might think that this is what I believe. This is to say that I don't. More than that I don't even understand most of Harris's arguments. Harris's prose style is even more stripped down than mine so I can read the words but their point entirely escapes me. This business of not being able to know the number of people on the university oval - what is it all about? If there is a crowd then in ordinary circumstances we only want a rough count anyway, but if it were necessary to go to such absurd lengths we could say that 'people' means 'born living people' where 'born' means 'having fully emerged from the birth canal or otherwise fully separated from the mother' and 'living' means 'not dead' where 'dead' means 'having no heartbeat or pulse, no circulation, no respiration, no brain waves, no blood temperature, no other vital signs and having been in that condition for at least an hour'. That should be good enough for anyone. I know very well that birth and dying are processes but we do not have to adopt a consensus definition of truth to know whether people are born and alive. In many brain death cases where life is maintained by a life support machine a consensus is reached according to a conventional definition that the patient

is dead and the machine is switched off, but at that point all sane argument is over and dead is dead. Dying is an event, a process, so there can be some discussion about what point in the process we think is sufficient to say that death has occurred, but this process always comes to an inevitable and objectively true end. Outside my house there are the remains of a hedgehog squashed flat by a car three days ago and dried in the sun to a prickly pancake. As far as I'm concerned it's a dead hedgehog. I do not think it credible that 'different but equally plausible theories and related methodologies' of 'different observers could determine/postulate with equal justification' that it is not a dead hedgehog. And the world is full of dead hedgehogs. I mean it is full of real objects which can be seen and heard and touched and felt and smelled and dissected and microphotographed and x-rayed and so on and so forth and can thus be known to be things of this or that sort. Of course these things can have different names. In Wales the word for 'hedgehog' is 'draenog' which means 'has prickles', but so what? I'm quite baffled by Harris's reference to the caves not far from Palmerston North. It might be relevant to certain discussions that Maoris named them in recognition of the moss that thrives despite the great heat and steam and that British settlers named them after the springs that literally boil from the ground. It might be similarly relevant to certain discussions (in etymology) that the English name hedgehogs so 'hedge-pigs' and the Welsh the more prosaic 'prickles' (yet the word for 'butterfly' is the much less ordinary 'iar-fach-y-haf' or 'little chicken of summer') but what is this illustration intended to do in the argument against a correspondence theory of truth? Is it supposed to show that perception is theory laden? That people - English people and Welsh people and Maori people - 'see' caves and hedgehogs and butterflies differently because of the way they name them? Or that they name them differently because they 'see' them differently? Either way this theory cuts across the grain of contemporary linguistics, with its stress on the arbitrary nature of the sign, and contemporary cognitive anthropology, with its stress on a common world commonly understood, and seems even to point to the impossibility - although Harris somehow manages it - of translation. Lukes has had the patience to argue against this theory calmly and sensibly. I can only commend his work to Harris and others similarly confused (I think they are getting fewer by the day though). As I understand it Harris's theory is incoherent, he says that the world is real and that reality is not created by knowledge (so far so good) but then he says that in producing knowledge statements we 'determine/postulate' such things as the number of people on the university oval, that Mercury is the nearest planet to the sun and so on. What is reality if it is not that the number of people on the oval is such a finite number, and that Mercury is the nearest planet to the sun? That must be reality. Harris says it is - he says the world is real - but that its reality can be known only by means of 'knowledge statements' which are always open to revision and which 'postulate/determine' that reality. And so reality is determined by knowledge after all. To get out of this trap it is necessary to say that knowledge statements reflect reality (often not too well) but not that they 'postulate/determine' reality. Harris's position is contradictory for a materialist. It leads obviously to the most classical forms of idealism, indeed, it seems to me that when Harris says that the world is real he, actually means that it is ideal.

Now to Harris's theory of ideology. He says that to be ideological it is a necessary but not sufficient condition that a statement must serve the interests of the dominant class. He must hold then that a statement may serve the interests of the dominant class and in some circumstances not be ideological. The sufficient conditions are indicated by Harris's 'consideration of other issues and conditions', but they are not given. Even then I'm not sure that this is Harris's position. At one point he writes that even apparently neutral descriptive empirical claims ... can be shown to be class interest serving and thus ideological', (op. cit., p.10, my emphasis). Here the sufficient conditions have vanished and it seems that there is only one necessary and sufficient condition in Harris's theory of ideology: viz, statements are ideological if they serve the interests of the dominant class. I could ask questions about the word 'apparently' since all knowledge is 'apparent' in Harris's epistemology and about the criteria by which class interests are to be recognised, but the contemporary theory on ideology has moved beyond this position so I will let it go.

Urry bypasses the truth/false dichotomy preferring to talk of misleading and partial knowledge, but I'll stick with it here if only for the purposes of exposition and distancing. I'll say that ideologies are not 'damn it all, "true"' - they are false. Here's a home-grown example of a statement which has ideological effects - i.e. distorts the truth u makes the truth less easy to reach and comprehend, serves the interests of the dominant classes to the extent - but only to that extent - that it blocks off more thorough and potentially politically more threatening enquiry, and so on: 'If all people not born here were sent back where they came from there would be more jobs for New Zealanders'. As a New Zealander born in Britain I've got an interest in that sort of statement. It is not true. It might at the level of appearances seem to be true, but it is not true. It is not true because (i) Britain and Australia (where most migrants come from) might well retaliate by repatriating a rather larger number of New Zealanders living in their countries, (ii) they might impose (further!) economic sanctions harming the New Zealand economy and reducing the number of jobs, (iii) for at least two decades migrants have been imported to carry out skilled work for which no New Zealanders were available and the economy would almost certainly decline sharply with their departure, (iv) the number of jobs is only indirectly related to the number of people available for work and there are no good reasons to believe that the decline in New Zealand's economic fortunes would be halted by the expulsion of 20 percent of its population. We could also introduce a little *reductio ad absurdum* - what if these measures failed? - expel all North Islanders from the South Island, all non-Dunediners from Dunedin? Eventually we'd end up with everyone living in their parish of origin - in other words a mass de-migration programme reversing 50 years (and why stop there?) of market/state-aided migration. This would create a temporary boom for transport companies and then chaos. I know what many people say when this is explained to them: 'Well, I don't care what you clever people say, all I know is that our Jane's Bill has been trying to get a job for a year now and there's Poms in our street that haven't been in the country that long with two jobs each.' All we can say to these people is that they could know more if they did care. I don't underestimate the time, effort and resources this takes or the political will it implies. Nor do I underestimate the extent to which some newspapers and politicians actively and cynically reproduce popular interpretations at the level of appearances in the interests of class domination. But I do not either make the mistake of imagining that they are produced for people by 'ideological state apparatuses' such as the media and the educational system. On the contrary they are home-grown (not only in the home, of course, in the sports clubs, the dairy, the Plunket Rooms, the barroom and so on) and the sooner we learn to recognise and cope with that the better. My example is most pertinent so that interpretation for this belief is in New Zealand entirely subterranean - it doesn't exist at the level of public discourse. No serious political group would dare to take up such a platform no matter how much support opinion polls showed it to have. It is one thing to note that ideas of this sort may indirectly serve certain interests of the dominant class and quite another to suppose that the dominant class necessarily has anything to gain by translating them into policy. In this case the effects would be disastrous. When women say that the personal is political they are absolutely correct. The most potent sites for the production of ideas which have among their effects the (re)creation of relations of domination between bosses and workers, men and women, whites and blacks, and especially the last pair of this trio, are closed and private locations. In many respects such ideas, have in fact, been driven from public discourse. We have to work where we can yet it is quite possible that even the most dedicated school based interventions might do not much more than drive them further underground. But when we do get the chance to combat them I don't see how it helps to argue that ideas like these are 'damn it all, "true"'.

This is not intended to be the start of a further exchange with Kevin Harris. If he wants to think as he does I suspect there is little I can do about it. What I can do is correct the impression that his position in any way represents the most recent developments in the Marxist theory of ideology. I'll be frank about this. What has finally got to me is Harris's scorn at the outdated correspondence theory of truth which Snook 'resurrects' - and when was it ever buried by Marxists? - then at Snook's 'amazingly long outdated claim about science devising "crucial experiments"' - and how is it then that Bhaskar, for one, has never ceased to make such claims since the publication of his first book

eight years ago? At one point in his article Harris writes 'any theory can be replaced by a better one'. We know that this is true of his own theory - it has been!

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