POST-MARXISM AND THE PROBLEMS OF 'MODERNIST' EXPLANATION

Gregor McLennan

THE MAJOR AND MINOR KEYS OF POST-MARXIST CRITIQUE

In this paper, I want to tackle some of the underlying issues around post-marxism in contemporary social theory, using just one exemplar of this emerging framework, namely Michele Barrett's 1991 book *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*. The rationale for this limited focus is that the field of 'post-marxism' in sociological, educational, feminist and cultural studies is now extensive, and it is consequently rather easy — but also somewhat unsatisfactory — to take a 'scattergun' approach to the central questions by citing many authors and gesturing at general tendencies. It seems to me better to anchor the discussion of those tendencies in a single text like Barrett's, partly because she is a widely respected commentator, and partly because the area she deals with — the theory of ideology — is of particular importance to radical educationalists.

One of my overarching themes is to suggest that post-marxist critiques of historical materialism and class analysis tend to be couched as rejections of the type of theory that marxism is thought to represent, or as drastic temperings of its explanatory scope, rather than being outright dismissals of substantive marxist propositions and analytic concerns. That is why the arguments for post-marxism tend to hang more on pejorative characterisations of general conceptual effects/strategies such as marxism's alleged 'reductionism', 'functionalism', 'essentialism', and 'universalism', than on the denial of particular historical materialist postulates, such as the systematically capitalist nature of the modern industrial order, which few post-marxists seem to want to question. For convenience, I will restrict my discussion to just two of these explanatory effects — reductionism and universalism — though the kinds of arguments I marshal in relation to them could be adjusted to cover similar questions of functionalism and essentialism, to which they are in any case closely related.

The second component of my argument is to point out that these supposedly faulty theoretical modes (reductionism and universalism) are seldom analysed in a fine-grained way in the post-marxist literature. Moreover, where they are more than gesturally featured, the continuing complexity of these issues tends to undercut the somewhat dismissive surface rhetoric. Thus, in Barrett's book a minor key of uncertainty and retrieval runs alongside the major key of renunciation. The dominant voice in the book is one which appears unambiguously to reject marxist theories of ideology. Thus, the author holds that "in recent years, the whole paradigm within which the debate has occurred has been extensively and tellingly criticised" (16), to the point where we must accept that "the materialist (in practice, economic reductionist) premises of marxism are inadequate as a basis for thinking about political, cultural and social life in a late twentieth-century whose 'determinations' are so different from those of mid-nineteenth century manufacturing capitalism" (139). As a general theoretical problematic, marxism is therefore held to be "woefully inadequate" (147). As a political theory it has gone beyond the "breaking point" of "viability" on the brink of which Gramsci had left it (51). Marxism's class-theoretical model of ideology, for

its part, now "does not work very well" (4), having been "problematised at a very fundamental level" (57), indeed having "collapsed" altogether (46). And its understanding of subjectivity in particular has been either non-existent (vii), or "lamentable" (119).

Taking heart from the fact that the "entire field of social theory is being recast in such as way as to take more seriously questions of culture and of subjectivity" (4), Barrett prefers to understand ideology as a matter of deconstructing the "politics of truth" rather than prolonging "marxism's obsession with the illusions of 'the economics of untruth'" (vii, 155). Drawing on some now-familiar postmodernist emphases, she believes that this shift of focus necessitates highlighting the "competing, and increasing, attractions of a newly elaborated theory of discourse" (47). One central component of this new discursive perspective would appear to be the Foucauldian strategy of treating all theories, identities and paradigms as regimes of truth, in which the concern to argue about the rights and wrongs of ideologies is replaced by one which latches on to "the processes by which effects of truth are secured" (143). Another new dimension is the idea of a pluralised, socialised psychoanalysis (118-9); and a further angle is felt to be the need for an understanding of concatenations of affective forces which possess "a certain force and coherence" and yet lack "a clear motive or logic" (such as World-Cup fever) (154).

Put this way, the critique of marxism is uncompromising, and a very positive buzz is created around the possibility of a new alternative perspective. Nevertheless, Barrett (like many of the best post-marxists) is not, as it happens, so fully committed to the 'major key' as she generally appears to be. And her hesitations, to me, signal a commendable awareness that without *some* version of the stigmatised modernist methodological 'sins', the very notion of explanation in social theory simply cannot be sustained. So the third and final emphasis in this paper is to say that there is a deeper continuity of concern between classical marxism and post-marxism than many on either side are willing to admit. That continuity of concern is partly epistemological — what is to count as social knowledge? — and partly practical: what is such knowledge for? Ironically, of course, post-marxists have some difficulty in openly admitting the continued relevance of these questions, because both epistemology and 'rationalist' visions of intellectual practice stand high on the list of bad old things that need to be quickly superseded. At the same time, a myopic emphasis upon rational explanation to the exclusion of questions of understanding more generally conceived is a problem that all social theorists face today, and the major contribution of post-marxism is to suggest that we explore this wider domain more freely.

REDUCTIONISM

Of the explanatory deficits of modernist theorising, 'reductionism' is most frequently referred to by Barrett as being very damaging for marxism. In addition to the general sentiments quoted above, Barrett makes a number of hard-hitting specific adjudications. For example, she expresses serious doubts as to whether the very idea of ideology can in any form survive the taint of 'economic determinism' with which marxism irreversibly glossed the original concept (vi); Laclau's early work is cited as a decisive intervention against reductionism (57); and Lukacs and Korsch as well as Gramsci are damned with faint praise for valiantly trying to escape the reductionist problematic of Second International Marxism, but ultimately failing to accomplish that liberation (26-8, 51-4). Clearly, marxism is

assumed by the author to engage routinely in reductionism (not even its best practitioners can escape it), and throughout the critical assessment of the historical materialist tradition, reductionism is portrayed as fairly obviously a bad thing to be caught practising.

One important theoretical issue in assessing the status of the post-marxist critique of reductionism lies in deciding whether marxism is being treated as outdated, strictly speaking, or whether the faults that are now apparent were always there but were not always seen. In one of those set-piece statements, for example, it is implied that the world itself has moved on, and so marxism, which may have been adequate for the analysis of an earlier social formation, is not adequate to the present one, which is characterised by very different 'determinations'.

In my view, the plausibility and simplicity of this 'historical' argument are misleading. For one thing, it is rather incongruous in terms of its post-marxist provenance. After all, post-marxism takes pretty much wholesale from postmodernism the idea that 'the social' is not to be conceived either in terms of possessing unproblematically 'real' empirical characteristics, or in terms of constituting a structured totality (64). Yet to say that marxism was adequate to an earlier phase of capitalist modernity but no longer adequate to the current social situation would seem to require a more robust account of both empirical realism and theoretical totalization than current 'discursive' meta-theories seem willing to accommodate. Luckily, Barrett gives herself space to manoeuvre by allowing that "the issue of determination and social totality [is] more contentious than ever" (46). But this hint of abstention — a very proper one, in my view — belongs to the cautious minor key of the argument, not to the major key of renunciation.

Questions of theoretical consistency aside, the substantive case for the inadequacy and outdatedness of marxism's reductionist ambience remain to be addressed, and the big points here are that class-explanatory propositions are less powerful nowadays, that there are now very significant non-class determinations, and that the whole cultural realm has become considerably more important. Yet, whilst it is indeed difficult for marxists to evade these points, it is crucial in the current context of debate to remind ourselves — if only as a matter of scholarship — that even in the epoch of nineteenth century manufacturing capitalism, marxists were frequently bombarded by this kind of critique. The metaphysical character of marxian economics was under sustained attack from its very inception; the hallmark of the newly founded tradition of academic sociology in the later nineteenth century was its concern to offer strongly pluralistic rejoinders to marxism in the analysis of both social stratification and the theory of social development; and opposition to the historicism and a priorism of marxist dialectical methodology has likewise been part of the staple diet of liberal philosophers. And through the decades, the continuity of concern about reductionism is particularly striking.[1]

Moreover, when we reflect seriously on the richness, pace and complexity of cultural life in nineteenth century Europe (think of any great Victorian novel, for example), it is both inaccurate and patronising to claim that culture should be seen as a significantly more important determination on social life today than it was way back in those simple economistic days. At the very least this near-dogma of post-marxism merits the kind of full scale comparative study that to my knowledge has not yet been undertaken.

Contrary to first impressions, then, the idea that social life has changed so dramatically in recent decades as to leave marxism looking analytically impoverished, when once it looked explanatorily rich, turns out to be by no means obvious or automatically convincing. Indeed, it would seem both more persuasive as well as more congruous with the revelatory rhetoric of post-marxism to maintain that there have always been more determinations, that culture has always been more significant, than marxism has ever allowed for. In that sense, whilst it may be right to say that "in recent years, the whole (marxist) paradigm...has been extensively and tellingly criticised" (16), it is quite wrong to imply that such critique is very new, since scores of bourgeois thinkers have been saying similar sorts of things all along.

With the historical argument unresolved, the brunt of the post-marxist critique of reductionism falls along the methodological, or meta-theoretical dimension strictly speaking. In this regard, it is marxism's apparent aspiration, either to analytical simplicity or to analytical completeness, that are found to be most problematical. Thus, few post-marxists would dispute that socio-economic class is an important determinant of cultural and socio-political life, and, in fact, how they tend to think about class is profoundly marked by the specific concepts of marxist theory. What they object to is rather marxism's apparently exclusive and reductive focus on class.

In fact, what exactly constitutes a reductionist explanatory programme, and whether this is a good or a bad thing is the subject of protracted and complex debate in the meta-theory of the natural and social sciences (see for example Peacocke, 1985; Charles and Lennon, 1992). Barrett herself (in the minor key) shows her awareness of that complexity when she urges that general questions of the meaning of determinism and materialism might usefully be shelved so that we can focus on the specific substantive deficits of class reductionism (159). But this shelving is not easy to do, given the initial assumption that what is wrong with marxism's focus on class is precisely its methodological reductionism, rather than its belief that class is important (which not many post-marxists dispute).

What, then, is the problem with reductionism as an explanatory strategy? Here we must bear in mind that in the natural sciences the explanatory reduction of the terms of a higher level of organisation (e.g., solid everyday objects like tables) to the entities and processes of lower levels of organisation (e.g., atoms, sub-atomic particles, quarks, and so on downwards) has been widely regarded as the very paradigm of successful enquiry. So much so that it is hard to identify any staunchly anti-scientistic critics who say that all reductionism is illegitimate. The typical pattern of resistance has not been to deny the value of reductionism in its place, but instead to say that reductionism is an inappropriate strategy for the social sciences. More recently, it has also come to be widely accepted that paradigmatic explanation in a very great deal of natural scientific research also turns out to be something other than reductionism in any classic physicalist sense.

Indeed there is considerable philosophical debate about what reductionism even in the classic sense entails. Eliminative reductionism, which is one way of putting it, is the idea that we can specify completely everything of significance in one domain in terms of the objects/processes of another domain. Thus, some behaviourists or physicalists have been portrayed as asserting that mental processes, for example, can be wholly reduced to statements about brain activity without any great loss. The idea is that almost by definition,

the terms of the lower level both account for and supersede those of the more complex level — like saying that there is nothing more to be said about water that is not more exactly contained in the definition of water as H_2O.

It would be getting into far too deep water to pursue this debate here, but what is interesting for our purposes is to note that even the hardest sorts of reductionism, in the hardest sorts of areas, are increasingly seen as contestable. But, just as importantly, no one is prepared just yet to say that reductionism is therefore to be seen as a wholly illegitimate research strategy. Far from it: some regulative notion of explaining the events of one domain in terms of those of another remains close to the heart of what we mean by explanation itself. You could even say that with the greater questioning of what constitutes strict reductionism, loose reductionism, paradoxically, becomes for its part more respectable, and its greater vagueness some kind of strength.

Against this backdrop, it seems clear that marxist 'reductionism' could not possibly fit an eliminative model. In the theory of ideology, it would be quite absurd to assume that, for marxists, you could do away altogether with the terminology and referents of such phenomena as, for example, the New Right agenda for social transformation, and replace them wholesale with the terminology of ruling class interests. Not even in the most vulgar treatment of such an issue is eliminative reductionism of this kind in play. Rather the typical proposition is that New Right ideology is in some broad causal sense closely connected to economic structures and capitalist class interests.

Is it legitimate to call some broad, causal sense of connection of that kind reductionism? Some would argue that to move from strict reductionism to broader notions like supervenience, dependence, constraint, or physical/material pre-requisites, is precisely to move out of the terrain of reductionism altogether (cf. Garfinkel, 1981). Others would argue to the contrary that to posit weak but still hierarchical connections of dependence/derivation between two domains is to continue to engage in a rather absurd metaphysical wild goose chase. This is because full reduction continues to be taken as a regulative ideal in circumstances where it cannot possibly be achieved (cf. Dupre, 1993: part 2).

This framing of weak reductionism is surely the appropriate one for tackling the problem of marxist reductionism. Indeed, even in some of the older post-marxist (e.g. Cole, 1948: 29) and liberal (Popper, 1962:107) critical texts, it was marxism's potential fatalistic determinism that was found to be unacceptable, not its general sense of the causal determination of cultural and social life by economic structures, which was often allowed to be found to be perfectly acceptable. So the issue of weak reductionism can pan out in a number of different ways. If you see weak reduction primarily as an escape from strict reductionism, then marxism is not reductionist after all. In an important book which covers many of these issues intelligently, Wright, Levine and Sober characterise the whole history of neo-marxism as, precisely, anti-reductionism, because they believe that marxism is intrinsically opposed to the 'physicalist' reductionist equivalent in the social sciences, namely methodological individualism (Wright et. al., 1992:116-20).

A different take on the same sort of position (and the one I personally favour) is to say that some kind of weak reductionism is definitely there in marxism as a guiding principle, but

reductionism in the appropriate (weak) sense turns out to be not such a bad thing after all, and it certainly does not imply any wholesale devaluation of the level of explained phenomena. Thus, to say that the emergence of New Right ideology can only be causally explained by reference to the conditions and interests of class formations is certainly not to imply that the specifically ideological effects of the higher level of organisation are of no intrinsic interest. On the contrary, it is just because discourses of (for example) national belonging, popular capitalism and traditional family life are so extremely interesting and powerful that we seek to understand where they came from, what sustains them and how they can be in some sense structurally explained. With that in mind, no one needs to apologise for proposing that class interests and economic constraints/tendencies be considered as being central to the causal nexus that produces neo-liberal ideologies.

Against this pair of options, Barrett's line would seem to be that marxist notions of a structural underlayer of causal properties, if not strongly reductionist in the eliminative sense, is still strong enough in principle to imply the worthlessness of the explained terrain. Such oversimplification, she might conclude, does merit both the technical term reductionism and the bad connotations that usually go along with it. I am not sure that this debate about reductionism can be resolved properly, and certainly not in this illustrative context. But it does seem to me that without a good deal more logical analysis and consideration of actual examples taken from marxist studies of ideological formations, Barrett's smearing of marxism with the brush of reductionism remains much less convincing than the dismissive tone implies. Relatedly, the post-marxist suggestion — not usually argued through as such, but often playing a crucial rhetorical role in the demolition job on modernist motifs — that critical social theory can do without any kind of reductionist impulse, whilst it is undoubtedly interesting, is highly problematic as well as chronically undeveloped.

One last sense of class reductionism in Barrett's commentary is worth questioning. This is where she maintains that the deficit in marxism comes not only through its generalised economism, but in its assumption that specific ideologies need to be seen as belonging to specific classes (56). There are two points to make against this surprisingly vulgar rendering of marxist ideas. First of all, the criticism is rather unfair. Marx certainly said that the dominant ideas of an epoch were the ideas of the ruling class, but it surely does not follow from this (and runs directly against Marx's best practice) that all ideologies can be allocated, by virtue of their content alone, into ruling class ideas and subordinate class ideas. If vulgar marxists have assumed this (and once again we have here a central claim that is not seriously exemplified in Barrett's text), then of course, they should be subjected to criticism. But the vulgar view should not be assumed to be the considered marxist view.

The second point is to note that even if the vulgar view was fairly attributed by Barrett to marxism *tout court*, it would not follow that ideological practices are free-floating in any autonomous sense. Not just marxism, but any strenuous sociology of belief, searches for clues in the structural characteristics of a social formation which might help us fully explain the apparent independent power of ideology.

One of the effects of Barrett's arguments on these issues is to try definitively to separate out and rank Marx and Foucault. In questioning the basis of this case, and in spite of some

obvious differences between these greats, I would also want to urge us to consider the significant overlaps between them. In this spirit, it is not too hard to portray Marx's proposition that the dominant ideas of an epoch are those of the dominant class as establishing, before its time, a quasi-Foucauldian research agenda. Do not ask, Marx seems to be urging, about the truth or virtue or necessary belongingness of the sets of dominant ideas that circulate in society; rather ask about how these ideas facilitate relations of class power, investigate how they come to be accepted as true, see how they rationalise the strategies of groups and institutions, and show how they can lead to the establishment of particular mechanisms of (capitalist) social control.

To see further the compatibility of Foucault and Marx, we need only reflect upon the recent fundamental shift in the regime of truth that governs academic production in the Western world. The pervasive move to audit, quality management, accountability, customer service, performance appraisal, aims and objectives, targets, mission statements and the rest has produced an extraordinarily powerful new discourse. And like most profound regimes of truth, it is almost impossible to hold on to a stance which is altogether outside that new frame of reference. Thus, academics quickly have become caught up in the process whereby both older elitist values and alternative radical ones alike can be defended only on condition that some interpretation or other of the new vocabulary of success gets legitimated and reproduced. After all, who amongst our sincere, hardworking, student-conscious, anti-elitist, reflexive and learning-curve-riding collectivity would deny that certain types of staff development, and self-, mentor- or peer-appraisal systems can be useful or even necessary?!

But does the relative autonomy of these systems of ideas, these normative struggles, these mechanisms and effects of power in the Foucauldian sense serve to wholly disconnect such ideological forms from the wider class formations and economic restructurings which sustain them? Of course not. Are they then reducible in any strict sense to the interests, entities, and processes of that lower level of complexity? Of course not.

UNIVERSALISM

The charge of 'universalism' against a theory refers to a cluster of possibilities. One possibility is its purported applicability to any society, regardless of time and place. This is sometimes referred to as the transhistorical aspirations of general social reflection, and historical materialism is sometimes taken to be a classic universalist theory in that sense. A slightly different construal is that universalism indicates a theory's claim to be universally true — not necessarily true *for* all societies but true, nevertheless unconditionally, i.e. regardless of the position and interests of the knowing subject. Barrett trades upon both of these meanings in her text. She refers to universalism being one of the chief "weaknesses" of marxism itself (vii), but also speaks of the "fading charms of universal discourses" more generally (163). In a more sustained way, Barrett draws attention to the problematic nature of theorizing ideology in an epistemological way, that is to say, in a way which implies that the analysis of ideology presumes to aspire to a more truthful, universal understanding (science) by contrast with the partial, distorted material (ideology) that is the subject matter of the analysis. Thus, she considers the main meta-theoretical orientation of marxism, philosophical realism, to be dubiously epistemological, since it is implied that objectivist

theorists have access to how reality really is, by comparison with the distortion of reality that occurs within ideological constructions.

In this vein, Barrett argues that the concept of ideology, as indelibly stamped by classical marxism, is undeniably epistemological, with definite pejorative overtones (9). Marx is assumed to be a realist (13), and realism is something that is decisively rejected by Foucault and that rejection stands as one of Foucault's perceived advantages over modernist alternatives (138). Marx was not, Barrett avers, a believer in the prevalence of 'false consciousness' as such, but he wrote persistently, obsessively even, of the distortions and illusions of ideology (5-6, 155). In this way, Marx bought into scientism and universalism in a big way, and he must now be sharply criticised for that.

Once again, we can initially agree with Barrett that marxism is marked as a theoretical project by distinctly epistemological (and in that sense universalist) tendencies. Barrett notes well (7-8) the sub-strand of marxism which attempts to treat the understanding of ideology in an epistemically neutral way (e.g. McCarney, 1980), yet she seems right to me to characterise marxism overall as scientistic in its approach to ideology analysis. What, then, of universalism as an explanatory sin in either of the two senses outlined?

Firstly, it has always struck me that the interpretation of universalism as being transhistorical is misleading. After all, if we adopt even a theory of the whole of human society, this is still a historical theory in some major way — it applies to the time span of social systems and their specific conditions of existence. Now, even if Marx was not committed to a strongly universalist vision of historical materialism, his ideas do seem to gesture at an evolutionary level of abstraction. This may be a dangerous level to inhabit, of course, but it simply cannot be ruled out as illegitimate on an a priori basis, as some defenders of a much more particularist style of historical materialism often assert (cf. Sayer, 1987).

And if Marx did not hold to a universal (transhistorical) theory of human history, his more specific theories are certainly awash with clusters of universal concepts — productive forces, relations of production, ideology, surplus extraction, etc. Indeed, on reflection, it is clear that just about every social theory must use universal concepts in this sense (structure and agency, regimes of truth, front faces/back faces, culture, ideology, gender, ethnicity, and so on). Here, universality or the striving for generality is the very condition of meaning: all language has a necessarily universal element in this sense.

We must also ask, what would a non-universalist theory look like? Wary of the sin of universalism, post-marxist and post-feminist writers often talk of the need to keep our theories rooted in the 'particular', the 'specific' and the 'local'. Despite the popularity of this kind of assertion, it seems to me to lead nowhere. Marx's own theory of capitalism and class relations was pretty much rooted in his time and place, for example (and he gets blamed for that too). More importantly though, the call for particularism is rather incoherent. We can never actually know when getting particular is particular enough, and, in any case, the smallest significant particulars you can think of (groups, selves, experiences, thoughts, words, events, actions) are themselves inevitably abstractions from countless further particulars. Barrett for her part recognises this problem openly (at least in the minor key) by asking how we might be able to "dampen down the universalistic pretensions of

theories without making a complete surrender to particularism" (161). This is an important and testing question for sure, but we could make a start on it by being somewhat fairer about the imaginative and scientific capacities that universalising discourses embody; and by trying to find even one single example of an interesting theory which does not move from the particular to the general and more or less stay there.

In terms of universality as epistemology, the tensions in Barrett's perspective are particularly noticeable. Not only Marx comes under the hammer for being too epistemological, but so also do softer theorists of ideology such as John Thompson (1990), who still retains the semi-traditional notion that ideologies work through a mechanism of "dissimulation" (29-30). This leads to the logical consequence that without either an organising focus on class, or a central epistemological dimension, we must wonder "what substance and precision a theory of ideology can have" any more (31). Barrett also goes on to claim that, ironically, the insights of apparently radical new theorists — post-structuralists (41-2), Laclau and Mouffe (1985: 78) — themselves turn out to be distinctly epistemological. Even Foucault is ultimately characterised as 'not a relativist in any way'; indeed he is acknowledged to be a typical philosopher, operating conceptually at an Olympian meta-level on other peoples' discourses, producing propositions that are "themselves loaded to the brim with truth claims" (Barrett, 145).

I very much agree with all this, and it is incisively framed by Barrett, but she does not seem to realise that the ubiquity of epistemology backfires rather decisively on her own dominant message, which is that it was marxism that put the epistemology into ideology, and that both marxism and perhaps ideology too must now be superseded because of that misguided universalism. In fact, when it comes to the crunch, Barrett is not prepared to argue this latter strong position at all. Instead, she comes up with a far more compromised solution. Because she knows that (as the case of the not-so-radical shows) any serious intervention in critical social theory will inevitably carry associated epistemological baggage, she accepts that it is extremely difficult to "let go of epistemological ambition" (41). What she would recommend, however, is that we severely "lower the epistemological profile" of the concept of ideology (167).

The change of tone which accompanies the shift from the negative critique of marxism to proposing something positive is striking here. From a stance which seemed to outlaw and stigmatise epistemology, we now have one which merely downgrades it. And when we see what Barrett's considered account of ideology is, the rationale for that more compromised meta-stance becomes obvious. In spite of her somewhat harsh dismissal of John Thompson's position as amounting to "soft epistemology", the concepts which Barrett rescues from the blighted epistemological terrain are those of mystification and the modernistically stronger misrepresentation (167) — terms which seem to differ only pedantically from Thompson's "dissimulation". When the chips are down, in other words, Barrett herself reproduces an epistemological definition of ideology: she cannot actually bring herself to deny that (some of) the findings of science must be granted "universal truth" (158), and the articulation of ideology as mystification and misrepresentation simply makes no sense without a backdrop assumption that there is something objective that is being mystified or misrepresented. The main intervention of the book is to be uncertain about what is getting misrepresented, not that something is misrepresented in and through

ideology. Once again the major key of Barrett's post-marxism misleads us into thinking that a decisive point of departure from the old style of thinking has been achieved, and that a more satisfactory positive direction has been developed. On both counts, this is not so.

CONCLUSION: EXPLANATION, UNDERSTANDING, AND POLITICS

This essay has attempted to show that post-marxist discussions such as Barrett's tend to base their rejection of traditional marxism on a superficial or postponed consideration of crucial and difficult explanatory problems such as those surrounding reductionism and universalism. Sometimes combined with an altogether unearned tone of superiority and certainty, post-marxists have proceeded to suggest, or even take for granted, very questionably, that certain new directions in social theory (Foucault, post-structuralism) supply the resources for demonstrably more adequate theories of ideology, subjectivity or whatever. Thus, Barrett talks of the new theory of discourse as a clear and productive alternative to the marxist account of ideology (47). Yet as everyone who is familiar with this genre well knows, outside of a negative contrast with caricatured realist paradigms, discourse theory, whilst interesting, is an extraordinarily heterogeneous area. Moreover, neither discourse theory nor any other post-marxist or post-feminist alternative that I can think of supplies the "more precise concepts" (168) that Barrett thinks the new angles do provide. Indeed, many of the terms in the new vocabularies of insight are manifestly — sometimes quite deliberately — less precise than those of an older provenance.

However, I want to conclude this paper on a more positive note, because I have not at all been recommending that theories which are openly and fully reductionist, universalist, etc. are therefore better than those which are not. And in defending aspects of specifically marxist theory I have not been arguing that marxism can survive unqualified or that it has an exclusive grip on the truth. Finally, whilst I have been complaining about the iconoclasm and lack of analytic discrimination in post-marxist writings, I have not once said that their general concerns are improper or that they lack urgency. Indeed that is precisely why I have sought to point up the nuanced and ambivalent minor key in *The Politics of Truth* as compared with the overpitched major key of renunciation.

How then are we to characterise the common ground that I see existing between complex/modest marxism and discriminating post-marxism? Clearly, it would take a further essay to tackle this issue properly, but a few broad-brush suggestions can be made, centring on the idea that the process of social understanding is something broader, and perhaps ultimately wiser, than a concern with explanation per se. To me, in fact, the most interesting contribution of postmodernist thinking is its questioning of the status of explanation in traditional social theory. Contrary to the impression given in some post-marxist writings that new theories are more explanatorily adequate to subjectivity etc. than marxism is, the better line to take is that we must try to get explanation itself back into proper perspective, possibly paying greater attention to matters of description and imagining. This is what Barrett is getting at when she talks about the difficulty of "letting go" of our explanatory ambitions in the theory of ideology (41-2). Somehow we feel the need to thicken up our descriptive register in talking about ideological phenomena with a view to achieving greater experiential or intuitive adequacy, but as a consequence we then worry that we might be getting too particularist, thus compromising our sense of explanatory adequacy. And vice versa.

To overcome this oscillation, understanding must be conceived as involving not only a well-grounded casual/functional model (or models), but in addition a whole variety of dramatic re-presentations, analytical insights, and other uncanny forms of depicting the phenomenon in question and its wider human significance. This shift in the picture of social enquiry thus preserves the importance of explanatory power, but sees the wider domain of social understanding (cf. Runciman, 1983) as being quite pluralistic, both horizontally (a range of explanations may co-exist) and vertically (explanation is part of a larger chain of enquiry). Nothing in this picture allows us to ignore some of the major continuing strengths of the marxist tradition, but it does rule out excessively dogmatic defences of marxism, and it serves to scale down any excessive rationalism in the modernist theoretical legacy.

This essay has primarily concerned questions of methodology rather than politics. But the political implications of these meta-theoretical debates are not hard to see. Just as both radical pluralism and outright reductionism, universalism, etc. in social scientific methodology can be improved upon by adopting the kind of integrated explanatory pluralism I have been exploring here, so in radical democratic politics the dogmatic polarisation which encourages a straight choice between old-style marxian socialism and the new (effectively quasi-liberal) postmodernism seems to me both hopeless and unnecessary (cf. McLennan, 1989, 1995). In that regard, I am sympathetic to Michele Barrett's call for a renewed vision of radical humanism. My main point in this counter-critique is that much of the post-marxist argumentation which surrounds that call fails to clarify or advance it.

NOTE

[1] Every decade since Marx's death has witnessed serious efforts either to thrust or to parry on the question of determinism and reductionism. After about the mid-1960s, of course, so many texts get involved in this matter that one cannot realistically list them. For some fairly random earlier examples, see eg. Simmel (1892), Bernstein (1897), Boudin (1907), Russell (1920), Hook (1926), Cole (1934), Eastman (1940), Berlin (1948), Acton (1955), Popper (1961).

REFERENCES

ACTON, H.B. (1955) *The Illusion of the Epoch*, London: Cohen and West.
BARRETT, M. (1991) *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
BERLIN, I. (1948) *Karl Marx*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
BERNSTEIN, E. (1897) *Evolutionary Socialism*, trans. London: E.C. Harvey, 1907.
BOUDIN, L. (1907) *The Theoretical System of Karl Marx*, Chicago: C.H. Kerr.
CHARLES, D. and LENNON, K. (Eds) (1992) *Reduction, Explanation and Realism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
COLE, G.D.H. (1934) *What Marx Really Meant*, New York: A. Knopf.
COLE, G.D.H. (1948) *The Meaning of Marxism*, London.
DUPRE, J. (1993) *The Disorder of Things*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
EASTMAN, M. (1940) *Marxism: Is it a Science*? New York: W.W. Norton.
GARFINKEL, A. (1981) *Forms of Explanation*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
HOOK, S. (1926) *From Hegel to Marx*, New York: Reynal and Hitchcock.
LACLAU, E. (1977) *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*, London: New Left Books.
LACLAU, E. and MOUFFE, C. (1985) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso.
McCARNEY, J. (1980) *The Real World of Ideology*, Brighton: Harvester.
McLENNAN, G. (1989) *Marxism, Pluralism and Beyond*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
McLENNAN, G. (1995) *Pluralism*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
PEACOCKE, A. (Ed.) (1985) *Reductionism in Academic Disciplines*, Guilford: SRHE & NFER-Nelson.
POPPER, K. (1961) *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
POPPER, K. (1962) *The Open Society and its Enemies, Vol. 2, Hegel and Marx*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
RUNCIMAN, W.G. (1983) *A Treatise on Social Theory, vol. 1, The Methodology of Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
RUSSELL, B. (1920) *The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism*, London: George Allen and Unwin.
SAYER, D. (1987) *The Violence of Abstraction*, Oxford: Blackwell.
SIMMEL, G. (1892) *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, trans. 1977, New York: Free Press.
THOMPSON, J.B. (1990) *Ideology and Modern Culture*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
WRIGHT, E.O., LEVINE, A. and SOBER, E. (1992) *Reconstructing Marxism*, London: Verso.