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by FRED INGLIS

Why Marx was Right

by Terry Eagleton

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Is it possible to be a roaring boy and a sage old pedagogue at one and the same time? It is indeed, for this is Terry Eagleton. Exasperated, as well he might be, by the repeated claims that socialism in general and Marxism in particular have nothing whatever to contribute to political argument after Cold War, after Chinese Communism has so abruptly mutated into 10% growth capitalism, after New Labour's old apostasy, Eagleton trundles his massive mentor on his Highgate plinth back to confront the most recent debacle of Western capitalism.

He does so by summarising, with his infallible dash, his unnerving hyperbole and explosive jokes, as well as his unwavering allegiance to the best the Left has thought and said, the ten most familiar *canards* with which Marx is now nonchalantly dismissed.

Thus and thus: Marxism is over, relevant only to nineteenth-century smokestack industry; Marxist theory and Marxist practice are horribly at odds, for in practice it only led to hideous oppression; Marxism commits its believers to a deterministic view of history destructive of human freedoms *and* to an impossible dream of utopia; it reduces all human endeavour to the dismal materialism of economics, denies spirituality any place in history; Marxists rave on about social class when everyone knows class is pretty well dissolved by modern mobilities; revolutionary theory is murderous, socialism is stiflingly statist and the State is inevitably oppressive; the new political movements of sexuality, ethnicity, ecology, have replaced the dead weight of Party correctness with a new lightness of heart and style.

One by one, with his usual gaiety of manner, his giddy extremes of comic dialogue ("... a claim as absurd as holding that admiring Cliff Richard is rooted in human nature ..."), his undoubted mastery of Marx's work, his steady recognition of his own Left conservatism (the ticket on which Normal Mailer ran for mayor of New York), his handsome good nature and generosity, his calm hatred of capitalism's cruelties, with all these splendid qualities on abundant show, our man knocks down the criticisms of anti-Marxism and the pig-ignorant Right.

He does so, it must be said, by rather more assertion than argument. He rarely shows how his opponents are wrong; he just tells them so. He convicts his enemies, especially in the Republican party, of sharing the materialists' view that the bottom line is the line to hold and that money always trumps everything else (Donald Trump, *en passant*, comes in for a couple of cuts), and he holds us close to Marx's own, solid humanity – "... no-one else had written so much on money and had so little").

Yet he misses so many chances. He spends far too much time explaining materialism, a category radically thinned out by Wittgenstein and by now only of interest to theological Marxists. But the glaring opportunity is missed to address Marx's critique of the callousness of capitalists, their self-righteousness and self-delusions ("competition drives up standards") and their indifference to social consequences, all directly to their present blindness to their very own catastrophe and the fact that they caused it.

For he seems, to one's surprise, ignorant of the work of contemporary Marxists. Arrighi and David Harvey both predicted the collapse of 2008, and Harvey in particular has persuasively shown how the over-accumulation of capital first leads to sudden stalls in the economy (unemployment, dead stock, inert capital) then to the invention of "fictitious capital" and the prestidigitation which magicked 'debt' into 'credit'; it moves thereafter in "a switching crisis" suddenly and violently to a quite new geography, leaving, for example, the North of England or Detroit and Columbus, Ohio the waste lands they have become. Harvey's hope is that as each switching crisis becomes more acute, something like a socialistic solution will seem at least feasible.

So it is odd that Eagleton doesn't point the moral at the present. Perhaps he intends this as a textbook rather than a tract for the times. That this guess is absolutely no putdown is vindicated by recalling those classic polemical textbooks, Ezra Pound's *ABC of Reading* or, best of all, Marx's own *Communist Manifesto*. But the sage should recover the hard edge and bitterness of both. He had them once.