

Review

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George Snedeker, *The Politics of Critical Theory: Language/Discourse/Society*.
University Press of America, 2004, 126 pages.



Oliver Cox

After the social movements that energized the social sciences literature in the second half of the 20th century died down, sociological theory returned to its established tracks: the study of the classics (Marx, Weber and Durkheim) and the "moderns" (a heterogeneous mix of "grand theory" a la Talcott Parsons, "middle ground" and "micro level" theories). Twentieth century sociological literature grew to such an extent that it became difficult to categorize and teach in any systematic way and this situation became even more unwieldy with the emergence of movement related theories (e.g., feminist, queer, racial, etc.) and the positive reception of "postmodern" thought in the American academy. It has been often said that the ghost of Marx haunted the development of classical sociological theory; today, it can be cogently argued that theory, including movement and "postmodern" theories, develops as an abstract negation of Marx and what marxism presumably stands for. The reduction of marxism at best to political economy and, at worst, to "economic determinism" and "class reductionism" has colored theoretical developments at the turn of the 20th century and is manifested in the

"privileging" of culture, language, discourse, agency, and subjectivity. Paradoxically, 20th century European theorists sympathetic to Marx but critical of the excesses of Soviet marxism and "vulgar marxism", fell into relative oblivion in the U.S., though their proclivity to "privilege" the cultural and subjective elements of the social totality could have led to a positive reception in the U.S. academy. Whether this can be explained by the marxist subtext in their writings or by their difficult prose, rendered even more intractable by the lack of philosophical and historical background typical of most U.S. academics, is a matter that can't be explored in the context of a book review. I brought up these ideas, however, to locate *The Politics of Critical Theory* in the present academic context and highlight what I see as its main contributions: to break the relative silence about critical theory that has characterized the teaching of social science theory since the 1960s, to illuminate its enduring theoretical and political relevance and last, but not least, to make this rich theoretical heritage accessible to students.

Unlike Perry Anderson, whose critique of Western Marxism is centered around its, in his view, political irrelevance, academic isolation, hermetic language and one sided emphasis on subjectivity and culture, Snedeker identifies the weakness of Western Marxism in the lack of connection between its key theoretical concerns (e.g., subjectivity, agency, culture, language) with their historically specific conditions of possibility: the capitalist mode of production. In the Western marxist literature, the analysis of social phenomena is generally divorced from their capitalist conditions. As a result, theorists cannot but theorize domination and subordination in abstract, ahistorical terms, as rooted in the repression of ahistorical human needs stemming from an ahistorical conception of human nature. The alternative to Western Marxism, therefore, is not the harnessing of theory to political practice (as it can be inferred from Anderson's critique), but the theorizing of the links between the mode of production and the political, legal, cultural and subjective dimensions of the social totality, something that Western Marxists purport to do but which, in practice, do not do.

For example, Snedeker points out, Habermas' analysis of the problematic nature of communication in late capitalism and the barriers to the ideal speech situation is rooted on an ahistorical psychological understanding of needs and repression, rather than on the connections between forms of intersubjective communication and capitalist structures of power, class relations and ideologies. The same can be said of Lefebvre's work on everyday life, consumption, urbanism, bureaucracy, etc.; they are settings where human needs are repressed by an oppressive social order and rebellion against this order reflects the ability of human nature to surmount repression. Social change is endogenous to human nature and its sources are not located in the capitalist material conditions affecting people's experiences. Marcuse, whose work Snedeker considers very useful to a historical materialist analysis of culture, nevertheless remains caught in a dialectics of domination and liberation based on transhistorical attributes of human nature, for in making use of Freud for the understanding of the relations between social structure and subjectivity, he focuses on the capitalist repression of the libido rather than the exploitation and alienation of labor. Acknowledging the importance of these authors' insights, Snedeker suggests that their contributions can regain theoretical and political relevance if placed in the context of marxist theory.

Other Western Marxists whose insights Snedeker explores are Lukacs, Althusser and Raymond Williams and he broadens the scope of Western Marxism to include Edward Said and Oliver Cox. In the present political context, a theoretical consideration of the dangers of irrationalism (Lukacs), the importance of the Enlightenment and the need to defend its principles (Habermas), and the political importance of culture and subjectivity (Williams) are necessary to counteract the seemingly unstoppable drift to localism,

parochialism and uncritical acceptance of the media shaped culture and subjectivity that characterizes the present historical conjuncture. Snedeker does an excellent job of critically examining the contributions of these authors and suggesting ways to link them to the analysis of capitalism as a revitalized, global mode of production.

The persistence of racist ideologies and racist practices despite Civil Rights victories calls for the consideration of the role of racism in the accumulation of capital and the ideological legitimation of racial divisions and oppressions. This is why the examination of Said's and Cox's work adds depth and value to this book. Said's critique of "Orientalism," the racism latent in the dominant political discourses about Orient, is a model for the critique of racism within political discourse and its function as a mechanism for creating "others." Representations produce the "others" as objects of derision, subjugation and exploitation. Even though Said does not offer a political solution, something impossible under the historical conditions in which he wrote, nevertheless the very possibility of critique by committed intellectuals creates the terrain for ideological struggles and advances the development of subjective conditions for qualitative social change. Cox's analysis of racism as an inherent feature of the functioning of capitalism opens up the question of the relationship between class struggles and the struggles against racism and, one might add, other kinds of oppression. Cox could be considered one of the founding fathers of world systems theory and his contributions to the sociological study of racism, democracy and capitalism have been unjustly ignored. It is to the author's credit to bring O. Cox's work to the attention of sociologists at a time when the use of the race/gender/class mantra substitutes for a serious analysis of the relationship between class exploitation and racial and gender oppression.

Disagreeing with Anderson's critique of theory isolated from practice, Snedeker argues that there is nothing wrong with theorizing or using technical language; in fact, echoing Althusser's emphasis on the importance of theoretical practice, theoretical work is relatively autonomous and this relative autonomy has to be preserved if theory is not to be reduced to matters of strategy.

Teachers of theory, whether at the upper division undergraduate or first year graduate levels, will find this slim volume a very useful companion to their main textbooks, a good introduction to the main theoretical insights of Western Marxism.