

Review

Tabish Khair

Perry Anderson: *The Origins of Postmodernity*. London/New York: Verso, 1998, p 143.

Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster (Eds.): *In Defense of History: Marxism and the Postmodern Agenda*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997, p 204.

Probing an Amnesiac Use of Memory

*As there are such things as the liar's
use of truth, and the well man's use
of illness, there must be an amnesiac*

use of memory.

*After the lightning
strikes the tree and takes all the leaves,
an amnesiac may break into hives.*



It is primarily (but not only) this twin problem of "an amnesiac use of memory" and the "hiving" of reality by postmodernism (as "the cultural logic of Late Capitalism") that the two books under review highlight. We shall return to this later. First, a few descriptive words about the books themselves. This is not an easy task: the concerns of these two books are many, for the "phenomenon" that is called postmodernism is many things at once and nothing altogether.

Perry Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* presents a thoroughly readable account and a restrained critique of "postmodernism." He is concerned not only with the origins and meanings of the term, but also with its "capture" by Fredric Jameson. This latter concern ensures that Anderson cannot perform the sort of brilliant dissection of the body of postmodernist myths undertaken by Terry Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, or the sort of extended study of the postmodern vis-à-vis the modern undertaken by David Harvey in *The Condition of Postmodernity*. On the other hand, the

idea of the capture of "postmodernism" by the Marxist discourse of Fredric Jameson is fruitful in at least two ways: it enables a better understanding of Jameson and his concerns, and it posits "postmodernism" as a term that can be, perhaps, put to progressive (analytical) uses. This second inference remains problematic -- much of Anderson's book is devoted to tracing the "after-effects" of this capture -- and I shall have cause to return to it later in this review.

The other book is a collection of articles, papers and two interviews (of Aijaz Ahmad) that appeared in a special number of *Monthly Review* edited by Ellen Meiksins Wood and John Bellamy Foster. In reproducing (and adding to) the special number in book format, Wood, Foster and the Monthly Review Press have done a favor to those who missed the original issue. *In Defense of History* sets out to do exactly what one would expect it to: defend history, Marxism, Science, the concept of class, a material definition of language, etc. from the ravages of "free-floating" postmodernism. It is a defense that has been long overdue and most of the contributors throw their punches with precision and élan.

Between them, the two books try to cure the postmodernist amnesiac: they remind him/her of the reality that cannot be reduced to words. Perry Anderson implies that, for example, the postmodern critique of Marxism as a meta-narrative caused the shrinkage of Marxism from analytic tool to one more narrative; Aijaz Ahmad, Bryan D. Palmer and David McNally stress the validity of that unfashionable concept "class"; Kennan Malik lucidly exposes how the latest postmodernist and poststructuralist theories replicate earlier racist assumptions; Carol Stabile takes up Feminism and Marxism (an unfashionable combination); and John Bellamy Foster provides an excellent "defense of History." However, there are several weaker essays. For example, Meera Nanda's arguments against the "social (de)construction of Science" could have gained from a historical examination of the development of Science (something that, on the evidence of her other writings, she is fully capable of providing). After all, the post-structuralist and postmodern vision of Science contains various blindspots. At its simplest, this vision coheres with the reactionary or conservative repudiation of Science as "European" that sometimes comes from the developing world. Both see Science not in its dialectical complexity and universality (including internationalism, both spatially and temporally), but as an alienated construct within an alienated "European episteme." It has never ceased to surprise me that many of the most "progressive" postmodernists in the West share this characteristic with some of the most reactionary politicians of, say, India and the Middle East: a dismissal of Science as "European." The intellectual shallowness of such a dismissal appears so obvious to any sound Marxist that s/he does not often bother to painstakingly refute such claims, which is a danger that Nanda runs into in her essay.

The other danger that we risk is the failure to bring together postmodernism's "amnesiac use of memory" and the "hiving of reality," to understand them in fully theorised materialist terms. While I will not presume to supply this lack, it is important to note how the two tendencies serve a common end.

Let us return to Perry Anderson's reading of a Jamesonian "capture" of postmodernism. To what extent can postmodernism be captured by Marxist discourses,

and to what extent is this "capture" merely a defensive act? Can one, however critically, employ a term that not only has problematic discursive accretions of its own but also grows from a root (modernism) that has itself mystified things best understood in materialist terms such as industrialization and capitalism? For example, what can one make of the fact, noted by Anderson, that the first major Marxist defense of Marxism as a "meta-narrative" came from Jameson a couple of years after Lyotard's dismissal of Marxism as a meta-narrative? Anderson does tackle these and related problems, but as a non-European Marxist I feel that some things are still stressed less than required in his and most other critiques of postmodernism.

If one sees the entire Marxist attempt to "capture" postmodernism as a defensive endeavor, one can relate it to Eagleton's brilliant critique of postmodernism as a response to the defeat of the Left. But in order to understand this defense and "defeat" one has to go beyond Europe and the recent privileging of "culture" by European/ized intellectuals on the Left.

At the risk of simplifying, one can claim that the "defeat" of Marxism -- and progressive ideologies sharing affinity with it -- can be connected to four "spaces" in this century. In the traditional space of institutionalized reactionary and conservative opposition, one sees the (re)birth of various anti-Marxist discourses, ideologies and plain misinformation. Within the space of the revolutionary, communist states created around and after the turn of the century one sees an attempt to catch up with the Capitalist countries through extensive industrialization -- an attempt that collapsed as a consequence of economic *and* military pressure from these Capitalist countries, internal contradictions and elitist bureaucratism in the communist countries, and the failure of communist countries to change to intensive industrialization. Within the space of Capitalist and/or Social Democratic countries, one finds an entrenchment of the idea of the Welfare state, coinciding with the period of greatest threat from revolutionary movements within and/or without. This entrenchment has itself been weakened in direct proportion to the disappearance of a revolutionary threat, but the Welfare state has not been completely dismantled for the simple reason that the Welfare state in the developed North stands in a position similar to the 19th-century bourgeoisie family estate in an exploited countryside. If you are a member, you won't starve and some charity is always given at the gates. But the rights of property remain inviolable. Visas and work permits are impossible to obtain for most.

Finally, the above characteristics have to be seen in the context of changes over the fourth space: the 84.6 percent of the world that had been colonized by 1930, most of which won its independence in the 1940s-1970s. This change pointed towards both universality and fragmentation. It was a kind of universality that made Frantz Fanon, a Caribbean subject with a Paris education, take up the cause of Algerians and be supported by Sartre. Unity was no longer impossible across vast divides, and chains were being cast aside everywhere. Or so it appeared.

But a kind of "fragmentation" was also taking place. In the positive sense, it appeared that colonialism itself was over and, hence, perhaps the kind of Capitalist exploitation

that it had undergirded would slowly be dismantled as well. What such wishful thinking did not take into account was the change in the modes and relations of production that *intensive* industrialization was bringing about over the same period. One may claim that Capitalism was one step ahead of Marxist and other oppositions to it.

When reality struck in the shape of a collapsing of these four (and all other) spaces into the "global space" of postmodernism, the Left had already frittered away too many of its advantages, assumed too many indefensible concepts, compromised on too many things (like the reduction of Socialism to the nationalist Welfare state). It had already relinquished its prior materialist concerns in favor of symbolic ones. It had largely handed over economics in favor of literature and, later, history in favor of cultural studies. In this context, Anderson's implication (also expressed by serious scholars on, say, the Indian Left, such as Arvind N. Das) that computerization will lead to international equity seems misplaced. Yes, India is producing software and computer scientists. But the cutting edge of computerization is still in the USA, Europe and Japan, and the best Indian computer scientists still get incorporated by or transferred to the "First world." There is nothing new in this: not only has capital always been more mobile than labor (as Marx has pointed out), the labor that capital requires has always been brought across national borders without at all reducing the restrictions on labor in general vis-a-vis capital.

The above discussion illustrates, then, one of the ways in which "amnesiac memory" and "the hiving of reality" go hand in hand. As Aijaz Ahmad puts it, "the capitalist state probably prefers to deal with a people that confronts it not in its unity but in its dispersal among communities and interest groups. Once we get distributed into distinct groups, our public rhetorics can then go on stressing how much we believe in everyone's equal rights, but in actual dealings with the state each community and each interest group can become a distinct supplicant competing with all others for its own share of the social surplus." And it helps when we forget this insight to the extent that the idea of alienation is replaced by concepts like "hybridity" and cyberspace is seen as the great democratic socialist space in a world where much less than 20 per cent of the population can even *dream* of computers, a world where only 20 per cent have *telephones*.

Of course, this "hiving" is not a construct particular to Capitalism, though Late Capitalism seems to have refined it to a high art. One of the problems in combating the homeostatic caste "system" in India stems from exactly this kind of "hiving" -- hiving that makes it difficult to talk of the "lower castes," makes it possible for specific castes to be exploited piecemeal by higher ones and finally makes it difficult for different low castes to unite. One can see how this applies to class and the now-uncool concept of the proletariat.

"In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to," Marx and Engels had written. But the above nexus of events has ensured that while the exploitation of an individual by another individual was "put an end to" in some countries, the exploitation of other countries and regions has increased. Hence, the defeat of the Left was not just the

victory of the Right; it was largely a failure of the Left to re-theorize its critique of Capitalism as a global economic system under the impact of the post-colonial fragmentation of empires, intensive industrialization and on-going computerization. The welfare state without revolutionary international socialism could only be an elaborate bribe to the progressives and the proletariat of those states. Let alone the reactionary elements, even these progressive elements needed the "hiving" and "amnesiac memory" of postmodernism in order to feel good about the "new world order."

One also has to concede that the postmodern privileging of stories against histories and the specific against the universal derives from the conundrum that while our rights are based on the universal claim of being human beings, we are oppressed not as human beings but as women, gays, Indians, Maoris, blacks, workers, etc. It is a conundrum highlighted by the apparent failure of Marx and Engels' above prophecy about the end of international exploitation. Our claim to rights is a *universal* claim, but our oppression is always *specific* to our particular, relational identities. I use the word "conundrum" and not "paradox" because, of course, the matter is not irresolvable -- when we are oppressed in our "particularities," we are oppressed only to the extent to which our "universality" is denied to us. In other words, an Indian was oppressed as an Indian during the Raj only to the extent that her rights as a human being (including the right to be "Indian") were denied to her -- rights made available to an Englishman in his particularity.

This may seem to be a simple conclusion, but it is a conclusion that needs to be emphasized -- whether in the shape of the defense of a Marxist "universality," of history or of the validity of classes. It is there that the two books under review, in spite of their limitations, ought to be read by those of us who see many recent developments (including postmodernism) as Marx's prognosis turned prophecy: "The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe." And now in cyberspace as well.