

Foucault Studies

© Jamie Melrose 2015

ISSN: 1832-5203

Foucault Studies, No. 19, pp. 253-257, June 2015

REVIEW

Simon Choat, *Marx Through Post-Structuralism: Lyotard, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze* (London: Continuum, 2012), ISBN: 978-1-4411-8508-2

Michel Foucault left hints as to Karl Marx's significance to himself and to his work. One recalls his put-down in *The Order of Things*: "Marxism exists in nineteenth century thought like a fish in water...unable to breathe anywhere else."¹ On the other hand, Foucault remarked once that he was prone to "quote Marx without saying so."² Potentially ambiguous, such mixed messages are for Foucault unproblematic: being "faithful or unfaithful"³ to canonical authorial appropriation, a matter of supreme indifference.

In *Marx Through Post-Structuralism*, Simon Choat details the intriguing relationship between Marx and four paragons of French post-structuralist thought: Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard and Gilles Deleuze. Choat's thesis is that these men "pursue a materialist philosophy" (171). Simply put, the post-structuralists embrace the "good" Marx — alert to *praxis*; aleatory; deconstructionist — and cold shoulder the "bad" Marx — teleological; determinist; reductionist. More precisely, Choat argues that the post-structuralists are sympathetic to a critical materialist bent in Marxian thought, while rejecting idealist implications in Marxist theory. Whereas idealists posit the realization of ultimate goals or ontologically-given proto-sources to justify their critique of social relations, critical materialists fixate on the concrete transformation of the social realm. Material relations are rejiggable endogenously. For the post-structuralists "certain dangers...in Marx's work" such as "the faith that the future can be pre-programmed or that critique can be grounded in the pure essence of some natural given" need exorcising or ignoring (92-93).

Foucault's connexion with Marx is indicative of how post-structuralists have related, overtly or tacitly, to Marx. Synergies are palpable when Marx is at his most "anti-teleological and non-totalizing" and "politically committed" (107), most interested in demonstrating that subjects are historically effected — Foucault and Marx had no truck with the eternal Cartesian *cognito*. For example, Choat highlights (119) how in *Capital* Marx delineates the making of the working-class, specifying its coming-to-be through dynamic capitalist regulation. This is akin to Foucault's celebrated account of penitential subject creation in *Discipline and Punish*. By and large, Foucault and Marx (and Nietzsche

¹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 285.

² Michel Foucault, "Prison Talk", in Colin Gordon (ed), *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977* (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 52.

³ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

too) call into question our historical totems “revealing that what presents itself as profound and essential, is nothing of the sort” (108). Both cast doubt on the myth of political power’s purely statist, interdictory role (117). Both swore off utopian prescription in favour of dialogic immersion in “existing struggles” (123).

Disjuncture is manifest when it comes to Marx’s evolutionist and epiphenomenalist passages, for instance Marx’s supra-explicative prophecy of the capitalist mode of production’s inexorable auto-destruction.⁴ Some of Marx’s (and Engels’s) statements regarding ideology,⁵ portraying psyches as mere ideational reflection, fall foul of Foucault’s admonitions regarding false consciousness (100). Choat shows a Foucault who wants to keep his Marx cake and eat it too. Foucault is simultaneously for and against Marx and (the far easier to knock) Marxism. This, though, most importantly, is not necessarily vacillation. For Choat, Foucault is a humble, non-dogmatic thinker, sharing certain analytical predilections with Marx. He had “a mixture of praise, emulation and respect” (103) towards Marx that not so much culminated in his work as it comforted his drive to find fault with essentialist or foundationalist overtones in Western philosophy and history.

And so it is much the same with Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze, although Choat peppers his observations on them with reminders of how his post-structuralist cast do not have a uniform stance on, or attitude to Marx. Derrida, for example, famously wrote *Specters of Marx* at the end of his career, an acknowledgement of Marx’s significance despite having hitherto mostly ignored him; while Lyotard engaged with Marx from early on in his career (66). He subsequently turned away from Marx and Marxism and was unwilling to go to any great effort to rescue them from their idealist traits (64-65). “[O]f all the post-structuralists Deleuze is the most vociferously anti-Hegel” (131); Foucault did not involve himself in such an essentially philosophical debate. Moreover, Deleuze, in contrast to his friend Foucault, not only positioned himself as a Marxist (126), but referenced Marx explicitly. Marx has a conspicuous affirmative voice in Deleuze. Like Derrida and Lyotard, Foucault wanted nothing to do with hermeneutically serving up a simon-pure Marx, nor with Marx’s eschatology, but unlike them, his genealogical turn meant that he was closer to Marx’s smiting of historical taken-for-granted (113).

Choat’s categorisation of the post-structuralists on the matter of Marx is best captured when he paraphrases Alain Badiou’s sorting rubric: “to pull some order from what might otherwise be a formless imbroglio, while avoiding the reduction of complex networks of differences and connections to a neatly arranged table of alliances and enemies” (9). In general, post-structuralists, starting with Louis Althusser, a sort of honorary post-structuralist (28; 161), scorned the negative connotations that they found in Marx, while never throwing the baby out with the bath water. These connotations were not the ones highlighted in the French post-war humanist return to Marx, the rebirth of the early pro-subject Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Post-structuralists were as profoundly *contra* the essentialist notion of the sovereign species-

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital; Volume 1*, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 929.

⁵ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, edited by C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1974), 47; and Karl Marx, ““Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*”, in Terrell Carver (ed), *Marx: Later Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 160.

being as they were the master notion of evolutionary dialectics (22-24). Take Lyotard: his analysis of capitalism and his relationship with Marx in *Libidinal Economy* entailed a shift away from his earlier Marxist identification with creative individualism and with the grandiose transformation into a post-capitalist state of nature. After this act of reckoning, Lyotard returned to Marxism in works such as *The Differend* to note favourably that Marx's great play of the incommensurability of workers from their surroundings still had a saliency, though, unfortunately, Marx would always be associated with the metanarrative that bore his name (58-60).

As for Derrida, he follows "firmly in Marx's footsteps" (71). Derrida's approach shares Marx's rejection of binaries such as the predicative, original presence of pure material forces versus the ahistorical *Geist*. In *Specters of Marx*, over the course of his discussion of Marx's fascination with the spectral present, Derrida teases out the collapse of "the real and the ideal", and matter and idea, in Marx's work (79). Relations of capitalism are existent, but they are also highly fictional abstractions that perversely impose strictures. Indeed, Choat points out (84-85) how Derrida missed that this deconstructionist trace was not just latent in Marx's abstract philosophising. Marx *did* de-ontology in *Capital*; he was involved in a historico-political struggle, themes that Foucault arguably grasped far better (92).

Turning to Deleuze, it is with his rendering of Marx that, according to Choat, we can see Marx "finally" (135) free from non-post-structuralist theorising. Marx by the point of Deleuze's *rendezvous* is not a theorist of the base and superstructure or a messianic class warrior, but a forefather in untangling the fluctuating, domesticated assemblages of capitalism. Marx, the man who got capitalism's endemic, viral qualities, pinpoints the capitalist machine's self-generated but not self-fulfilling abolition. Processed through Deleuze, this becomes a quasi-Freudian capitalist realisation of a particular *thanatos* — crisis, collapse and depletion — and an irregular, unsurpassed drive to renew and conquer. Marx's revolutionary gift is to recognise the blessing/doom game on show: "another world is possible" (153) only on the *potentially-laden* terms of this one. In his Marxian guise, Deleuze begins "from concrete situations" to "search for revolutionary opportunities in specific moments" (154).

Choat walks a tightrope throughout this book. He wants to do justice to the four post-structuralists — each of them have a dedicated chapter — and agitate for a coming-together between elements in Marx and the post-structuralists' *take* on things. Therefore, he is obliged to settle on a fecund intersection, a meeting of both sides of the nominal Marx post-structuralist split. Choat's nodal point in *Marx Through Post-Structuralism* is critical materialism. He gives three defining features: philosophy as political intervention; history without "endpoint;" and (*à la* Foucault and Marx's coupling) the subject understood as made by, not previous to, historical practice (172). For Choat this intellectual settlement is of utility because, firstly, it sets Marx and the post-structuralists up so that they can be re-examined, and secondly, it flags up a common flaw in Marx and post-structuralists; namely, the idealism inherent to their own anti-idealism. The political commitment to repudiate solutions based on the arrival from outside of the saviour Other leads to a situation in which not waiting for an extraneous answer equates to "resignation in the face of the immutability of our present situation" (172). Such synchronic

internalism guarantees an idealist fix on social orders developing momentum of their own accord.

To combat this, Choat re-promotes his critical materialist argument as an authentic return to the best in Marx and post-structuralism, “negotiating a path between the immanent potential of the present and the unpredictability of the future” (174). Critical materialism provides the means for a commitment to radical political idols, idols which hold no ontological mysteries that erstwhile emancipators fretted to locate. Radicals are expected to change material surroundings by paying them due respect not veneration. In this vein, one of Choat’s most startling *exposés*, at least for me, is his references to how the post-structuralists positively evoke class.⁶ Following this line of argument, dare one say that there is no good reason why “trendy” pomo theorists ought not to be alongside the usual suspects of the militant left on the metaphorical barricades?

Critics of Choat’s reading might protest its indeterminacy, his flitting between Marx and the post-structuralists. After all, have post-structuralists not been against Marx paradigmatically? Did the post-structuralist mode pushing out the Marxist in radical circles not symbolise that Marx cannot be rescued from his teleological, determinist entrapment? There is, too, a lack of novelty to Choat’s conclusions. This book is yet another reminder that out of the constellation of Marxian deliberation, certain insights can be contextually mobilised in support of the various antis, posts, and nons enumerated by Choat. That there is no simon-pure Marx or Marxian meta-theory, that Marx is habitually put into service, is somewhat received wisdom. Choat’s undertaking represents one more attempt to save Marx from the clutches of crudeness, albeit in a different idiom as that of Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, or Stuart Hall. In this sense, I am surprised by the minor role of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s arguments in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (5-6). Derivative of the post-structuralists they may be, and concerned more with Marxist theory than textual Marx, they are two of the most prominent representatives of the sort of path negotiation Choat mentions.

In his account of “a post-structuralist Marx” (172), Choat does not pick a fight with another work in the field. He serves up an excellent synopsis of the *discussion ouverte* between Marx and post-structuralism, elaborating a profitable meeting of minds. In terms of Foucault scholarship,⁷ this work is not really a further contribution to the “how similar were they?” discursive commentary on Foucault and Marx. Choat is, rather, clearing the ground for a type of common sense: Foucault, post-structuralists, and Marx are to be pragmatically read together. Who knows? On learning this lesson those ironical and sceptical, yet still activist, political subjects may be a lot more pellucid. One can *de omnibus dubitandum* and still fight for a cause.

Jamie Melrose
School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies
University of Bristol

⁶ Derrida is quoted: “[i]f I had wanted to say that I believed there were no more social classes and that all struggle over this subject was passé, I would have” (Choat, *Marx Through Post-Structuralism*, 175).

⁷ For the latest on Marx and Foucault’s intellectual relationship, see Andrew Ryder, “Foucault and Althusser: Epistemological Differences with Political Effects”, *Foucault Studies*, 16 (2013), 134-153.

Jamie.Melrose@bristol.ac.uk