

Dennis Dworkin, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, the New Left, and the Origins of Cultural Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

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

“[B]y contrast to earlier Marxisms,” declares Fredric Jameson in his contribution to *In Defense of History*, “[t]he Marxisms ... that emerge from the present system of late capitalism ... [will] appear to be more cultural in character.” (181) What might this mean? Is it a helpful assessment? To comprehend the significance of an evolving “cultural Marxism” requires examination of two intertwined issues: The history and current character of Marxism’s intellectual engagement with cultural theory, and the changing status of “cultural” practice within the capitalist political economy.

The two books under review allow us to take up the first of these critical questions. Dennis Dworkin provides a careful and relatively comprehensive assessment of cultural Marxism’s emergence as a postwar British intellectual and political project, which developed around both history-writing and what came to be called cultural studies. Readings of texts by historians such as Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Catherine Hall and Sheila Rowbotham, and by cultural analysts including Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Angela McRobbie, are effectively interwoven with exegeses of environing political trends. The far-reaching theoretical debates about culture and society, consciousness, experience and ideology, which Perry Anderson once termed “arguments within English Marxism” are thereby situated and further clarified.

Dworkin is hardly unique in proposing that British cultural Marxism “grew out of an effort to create a socialist understanding of Britain which took into consideration postwar transformations that seemed to undermine traditional Marxist assumptions about the working class and that questioned the traditional Left’s exclusive reliance on political and economic categories.” (3) “In opposition to orthodox Marxists who reduced culture to a secondary status — a reflection of real social relations — and conservatives who saw it as the best that has been thought and written,” Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and several erstwhile members of the Communist Party’s historians Group “viewed culture in anthropological terms, as an expression of everyday life and experience.” (79) Heterodox revisionism was especially significant, early on, within the segment of British cultural Marxism that was growing into “cultural studies,” as Dworkin suggests: “A founding principle of cultural studies was opposition to orthodox Marxism.” (141)

Dworkin does not seek to explain whether Williams’ and Hoggart’s long-standing (if sometimes agonized) commitments to the British Labour Party, even long after the latter’s willingness to act as a party of capital was plain to

see, comprised cause or consequence of this revisionary stance.¹ Nor does he take up the important question, introduced as a result of recent scholarship, of whether “the traditional Left” did in fact engage in this wholesale exclusionary reduction of culture.² Nor, finally, does he discuss why the cultural Marxist project — which, after all, was concurrently pursued by analysts elsewhere should have succeeded best in Britain rather than, say, in Italy or France. But Dworkin does show clearly show, by the late 1960s, in the wake of the new wave editors who took over at the *New Left Review* British historians and cultural theorists began to assimilate works of continental Marxism by Althusser, Gramsci, Horkheimer and Adorno, Goldmann, and others. Through the process of intellectual self-examination and confrontation that ensued — a complex evolution that he covers well — British cultural Marxism was ineradicably reoriented. Broadly speaking, as Dworkin aptly concludes, this youthful tradition “remained committed to radical change, but whether it remained Marxist in any conventional sense is debatable. That tradition perhaps is best described as an eclectic mode of theoretical and political radicalism.” (251)

Not least through an evolving interaction with British cultural Marxism, forms of postmodern cultural analysis and theory emerged, as perhaps the most influential mode of such eclecticism. Indeed, during the 1980s and 1990s, postmodernism took Anglo-American scholarship by storm. What is the relationship between this postmodernism and Marxism?

This issue is addressed, not as intellectual history but as critique, in the essays that make up *In Defense of History*. Wood and Foster, building on articles published in a prior issue of *Monthly Review*, assemble a diverse array of writers, and take up different aspects and implications of postmodern cultural analysis. The editors’ intention is to suggest some of the ways in which “historical materialism can shed light on the issues that most preoccupy postmodernists ... in more fruitful, forceful, and liberating ways” than postmodernists themselves. (14-15) At particular moments, this goal is realized. These highpoints include Carol A. Stabile’s trenchant discussion of the consequences for women and for feminism — of academic postmodernism’s cavalier dismissal of Marxism’s “totalizing” theoretical ambition; Kenan Malik’s ironic portrayal of how the postmodern critique of racial discourse in fact “reproduces the very assumptions on which racism has historically been based” (112); Aijaz Ahmad’s effort to keep alive cultural studies as a contemporary historical materialist project; and Francis Mulhern’s elegy for a cultural studies which, because “[I]t leaves no room for politics beyond cultural practice, or for political solidarities beyond the particularisms of cultural difference ... is not only furthering the dissolution of politics into culture but in the process also squandering the legacy of its pioneers.” (50) The consensus among contributors is that postmodernism harbors radically reactionary elements, which are comprehensible only when situated within the

long and complex moment of capitalist triumphalism that began in the 1950s and gained a second wind with the collapse of Soviet socialism. At best, writes Foster in his conclusion, “[p]ostmodernist theory is ... easily absorbed within the dominant cultural frame.” (193)

On the other hand, where they speak to the issue the contributors agree that Marxism remains “the necessary intellectual ground for all those who seek, not to revel in the ‘carnival’ of capitalist productive and market relations, but to transcend them.” (193) Indeed, as Jameson neatly puts this point, because Marxism “is the science of the inherent contradictions of capitalism,” it is “incoherent to celebrate the death of Marxism” in the same breath with which one announces the definitive triumph of capitalism and the market.” (175) Marxism ought only to be strengthened as a theory by the unprecedented generalization of capitalist relations of production throughout the contemporary world.

But has it been? It is noteworthy that more than half of the essays that comprise *In Defense of History* (including those by each editor) fall back on the contributions of Edward Thompson as a benchmark, and a counter, to postmodernism. “This is how Marxists should approach culture,” they seem to declare. Must one be a heretic, then, to question the current status of cultural Marxism — considered not only as a corrective for postmodernism, but as an intellectual and political project in its own right? Does British cultural Marxism continue to constitute a much-needed intellectual advance? Or, to the contrary, has it been significantly superannuated?

For all its merits, British cultural Marxism seems to me to be inadequate to the task of analyzing the contemporary social formation. This is not because — as is so often claimed, and by Dworkin as well — the consciousness and experience that comprised the vitalizing concepts of British cultural Marxism have been irredeemably invalidated as foundational concepts. To be sure, these terms cannot be taken at face value. Domination, hegemony, ideology — call it what you like — does not stop short of consciousness or experience, but rather honeycombs them. Romanticized visions of class subjects, accordingly, will hardly serve to obviate this problem. Nor is the cultural Marxists’ focus on class relations a crippling problem, as the best of contemporary historical and cultural analysis also incorporates relations of gender and race. As Wood writes, a “healthy respect for difference and diversity, and for the plurality of struggles against various oppressions, does not oblige us to jettison all the universalistic values to which Marxism at its best has always been attached, or to abandon the idea of a universal human emancipation.” (12) There is little to suggest that Thompson or Williams, at least, would have demurred.

The difficulty faced by British cultural Marxism stems, it seems to me, from a different source. Cultural Marxism created itself by fighting to reorient a Marxist orthodoxy that, it charged, relied on selective and reified designations of base and superstructure, and equally reified notions of

economic determination. Something called “the economy,” denoting agriculture, mining and manufacturing, was the putative primary force, defining the features and tendencies of what was taken to comprise an entirely separate zone, “culture.” In contrast, the revisionists — led by Williams — showed that “culture” could not be separated so easily from “economy,” and that the idea of determination perforce also had to be substantially revised. “Culture’s” novel placement, foursquare at the front of analysis, originated in this sense as a methodological strategy — a means by which to create the intellectual room needed for ongoing intellectual revision. At a certain point, however, the merits of this procedure began to fade.

The revisionists’ preoccupation with “culture” underwrote a long and complex process of conceptual reformulation, as attention shifted from a particular set of class-defined expressive practices to “a whole way of life” and, thereafter, to “ideology” and, as French theory was assimilated, “discourse.” The very term “cultural Marxism” — doubly at odds with Marxism’s older self-conception, as “the science of society” — betrays this characteristic displacement. If, at the outset, the problem had been that political economy marginalized culture, then, notwithstanding the 1980s “New Times” project, the problem became that cultural studies drew away from even a nominal connection to Marxian political economy. As Stuart Hall himself has conceded, “What has resulted from the abandonment of deterministic economism has been, not alternative ways of thinking questions about the economic relations and their effects, as the ‘conditions of existence’ of other practices ... but instead a massive, gigantic, and eloquent *disavowal*.”³ “Culture” thus ironically became reified in its own turn. Following a few valiant and important forays, the revisionists pulled away from the essential task of reintegrating culture into Marxian theory; indeed, soon after the engagement with Althusser, such a project was broadly rejected, not on the grounds that it was daunting, as that it had become positively unappetizing.⁴

Today the disabling nature of this deferral is widely apparent, and it involves something more than eclecticism. “Radical” cultural theory no longer enjoys means of speaking in theoretically coherent terms to political-economic trends. Toothy embraces of concepts like “post-Fordism” and, now, “globalization,” only signal the basic failing, while actually often adding to the confusion. Capitalist relations of production have attained worldwide sway and unprecedented generalizability across the field of cultural production; Jameson thus justifiably writes of “the more universal saturation and penetration of commodification itself, which has now been able to colonize large zones of that cultural area hitherto sheltered from it.” (181) As each day’s news makes more apparent, meanwhile, the global market system is swerving toward — dare we say it? — a form of political-economic crisis that has been successfully staved off since World War Two. What does, indeed, what can radical cultural theory in its present state tell us about these precipitous

processes of change, in which “culture” is so patently and thoroughly implicated?

Hallowed references to the British revisionists are not sufficient, for — contra Jameson — a specifically cultural Marxism is no longer the urgent need. “[T]he materialist enterprise,” reflected Raymond Williams two decades ago, “defines and redefines its procedures, its findings and its concepts, and in the course of this moves beyond one after another ‘materialism.’”⁵ If Marxism is to carry through on its promise of providing a useful contemporary diagnosis, it must try at last to bring “culture” and “political economy” under one roof.

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¹ A sustained analysis of British policies under the Labour Government that was voted into office in the Fall of 1945, by a leading U.S. radical — but not a Marxist — political-economist revealed the stark limits of this supposed “middle-way Socialism” as early as 1950. Robert Brady, *Crisis in Britain: Plans and Achievements of the Labour Government* (Berkeley 1950).

² E.g., Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London 1996).

³ Stuart Hall, “When was the ‘Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the limit,” in I. Chambers and L. Curti, Eds., *The Post Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London 1996), 258, original emphasis, in Graham Murdock, “Base Notes: The Conditions of Cultural Practice,” in Marjorie Ferguson and Peter Golding, Eds., *Cultural Studies in Question* (London 1997), 100.

⁴ Stuart Hall, “Marx’s Notes on Method: A ‘Reading’ of the ‘1857 Introduction,’” *Working Papers in Cultural Studies* 6 (1974): 132-70; Stuart Hall, “The ‘Political’ and the ‘Economic’ in Marx’s Theory of Classes,” in Alan Hunt, Ed., *Class and Class Structure* (London 1977), 15-60; Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (New York 1977); Raymond Williams, *Culture* (Glasgow 1981).

⁵ Raymond Williams, “Problems of Materialism,” *New Left Review* 109 (May-June 1978), 17.