On the Socialist Fantasy

Dennis O'Keeffe

Thinkers of the New Left, by Roger Scruton, *Essex, U.K.: Longman, 1985. 227 pp. $9.95 (paper).*

THIS IS A BRILLIANT book, so remarkable in its range and erudition that it is difficult to explain the hostility that has for the most part greeted it in the British academic press, even from anti-socialist intellectuals. Scruton takes fourteen influential critics of capitalism and the liberal order and flanks them with an introductory chapter on the idea of the "left" and a closing essay on the notion of the "right." In between these—impressively constructed —brackets, Scruton's fourteen Marxisant gurus are subjected to the most merciless intellectual analysis since Leszek Kolakowski's dissection of the whole Marxist tradition in the late 1970s.

Not that one agrees with everything. I do not care for the title. Scruton himself admits that the left-right picture makes sense "only locally." That is an understatement. Again, he argues convincingly that in many respects Marxian socialism and Fascism-Nazism are deeply similar. Since he also applauds conservatism as a customary goal-less politics, the very opposite, that is to say, of Fascism, there are grounds for thinking one should write and say nothing which links conservatism and "right-wing" dictatorships, even at the level of terminology.

The men Scruton is attacking mostly call or called themselves socialists, like Stalin (and Hitler) before them. If anything unites them it is an emotional link: a hatred of liberal civilization. Indeed any critic of socialism looking for a more elaborate network of convictions and commitments would be hard put to find a group of scholars sufficiently eminent to be worth attacking. Does not the heterogeneity of "socialist" views serve as a meretricious cover for outcomes which are, if not monolithic, certainly homogeneous in tendency? My particular batch of reds or fellow-traveling gadflies would have been somewhat different, though Scruton has undoubtedly drubbed some of the worst offenders. The American, Wallerstein, is a thin re-run of Lenin and of Baran and Sweezy on imperialism. I would have replaced him with the much more formidable Gunder Frank. Nor is the posturing Galbraith worthy of inclusion. His views on economics are approximately those of Mussolini. Pierre Bourdieu might have been included, just for his influence on the sociology of education.

I would not have included E. P. Thompson. Eric Hobsbawm is a far superior historian. Indeed, not everyone will agree with Scruton's verdict on Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*—"this brilliant and ambiguous work." It is in fact only a colorful trouble-at-the-mill narrative, its Marxism mostly *arrière-pensée.* Incidentally Thompson's open letter to Kolakowski, following the latter's abandonment of the Marxist fantasy, deserves a high place in the annals of sentimentality and bad taste.

Ronald Dworkin is, says Scruton, intellectually dishonest. A typical, and very gifted, Ivy League "liberal" of the establishment anti-establishment class, he has evolved what is essentially a conservative "natural justice" view of law, on to which he has placed an accretion of fussy interventionist politics, adhered to with lofty and dogmatic conviction. Like Galbraith, however, Dworkin gives every impression of material commitment to the civilization he likes to castigate. He prefers his socialism, in the larger sense, at a safe distance.

Indeed one way of dividing Scruton's fourteen is between those who genuinely favor tyranny and murder, even at home, and those who are mostly play-acting. Sartre was fascinated by "revolutionary" violence and every kind of moral perversity. Althusser has spent decades as the guru of that supine arm of Moscow, the French Communist Party. Lukacs, although a crafty trimmer, was dominated by his hatred of the actual world. I see Dworkin, Galbraith, and Laing, by contrast, as among what Arthur Koestler dubbed the "semi-virgins" of totalitarian flirtation; peeping Toms, watching history's debauches through a hole in the wall.

Sartre was the most talented of the writers Scruton picks on. Scruton freely confesses the genius of the man and his essay on Sartre is itself appropriately outstanding. It manages to convey a sense of the obscure and intractably pessimistic character of Sartre's formal philosophical psychology and also of the tortured and perverse process whereby this was first dredged up from Sartre's dark soul and then forced into the ostensibly unlikely mold of communistic politics. The conventional notion that Sartre was a Marxist but never a communist is quite false. He was actually a communist who was never really a Marxist. Sartre's theoretical politics was foredoomed. The attempt to insinuate an ahistorical and utterly personal outlook like existentialism into an abstract and impersonal development stage theory was a hopeless non-starter. Moreover Sartre was politically wrong about everything and even when he corrected himself at times, he did so twenty years too late. If Scruton misses anything it is perhaps the full force of Sartre's madness. But the reader wanting some sense of why *La Nausée* is a work of genius and of the huge inadequacies of *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* will find much to be grateful for in this superb sketch.

Almost as notable is the splendid essay on the late Michel Foucault. This includes a neat discussion of the French love/need for an enemy. In our times this has been met by that all-purpose hate-kit, the bourgeoisie. But Scruton fails to note that the French do not care to specify this term precisely. It can mean capitalists or middle-class professionals, an important distinction if one remembers that all of Scruton's angelic fourteen belong to the second category, and that the members of that category have made a more determined effort than any capitalists to manage our minds.

Foucault was the master theorist of "interests." He, too, was not a Marxist proper, but a professional surpriser and outrager. For someone to call something white was an invitation to Foucault to call it black. The exercise was in part sustained by the French love of smart coffee-table punning, and in part by the growing ignorance of history amongst European academics. Take Foucault's famous attempt to represent modern liberal capitalism as a kind of super Borstal! The Friedman view that our society is the most creative and tolerant as well as affluent society in history is more convincing in terms of all the obvious indicators. But if minatory comparisons *are* in order, one might say that today some fairly criminal young people in our society are treated at the very worst like ticket-of-leave men, for offences that earlier times would have met with mutilation. One wonders why Foucault does not look at Saudi Arabia or Iran.

Like many perverse geniuses, Foucault is distorting things which are true. The potential for pushing people around which democratic governments possess is, given modern technology, huge. But the liberal reality is not a social prison. It is more like, overall, a slackly run super-market, with widespread pilfering, bouncing checks, and indifferent staff.

Scotland's own R. D. Laing exploits this same trick of mechanical reversal. His achievement has been to popularize the view that the "mad" are not mad, that conditions such as schizophrenia or other pathological disorders will, if explored through a sensitizing "phenomenological" approach, soon be revealed as social constructs. The real source of pathology is the "bourgeois" family. How odd that a psychologist should have recourse to so gross a sociological reductionism!

Some of Scruton's writers belong together in sub-set versions of socialist intellectualizing. Antonio Gramsci and Perry Anderson, for example, have in common certain powerful conjuring abilities. The centerpiece of the Marxist philosophy of history, the metaphor of the base and superstructure, has been in ruins since the rise of the fascist societies and the failure of twentieth-century capitalist economies to go communist. Gramsci with his concept of "hegemony" rethought the Marxist theory of ideology along lines which are fundamentally idealist and yet have been widely acclaimed as preserving the integrity of the Marxist venture. Anderson, in a series of extraordinarily erudite but intellectually slippery publications, has sought to Marxianize the writing of history, and again to preserve the theoretical carapace whilst absorbing the need for an idealist and autonomous account of human action. Both writers effectively concede that the economic base does not constrain the (non-economic) superstructure. They are, in fact, the Marxist equivalents of Roman Catholics who do not believe in the Resurrection. Such is the fate of those who pretend that history can be written as though it were a science.

Some of Scruton's targets belong together not through theoretical agreement but in a fraternity of hideous language. Rudolf Bahro, Louis Althusser, and Jurgen Harbermas write as if deprived of light, their obfuscating neo-logisms and jargon-laden prose uniting them in a kind of kinship for the dead of soul. Bahro, refugee from communism, nevertheless retains in seeming entirety the Marxist-Stalinist vision. In case of fire, put on more wood, as the old Yorkshire joke has it. If planning and bureaucracy have failed, let us have more of them. All the blindness of the Marxists is concentrated in this attitude. Once they have stopped pretending there is no Gulag, they are condemned to the view that given that there is, it is a betrayal of their vision, when most of what they write and all of what they do show that it is an enactment of that vision. One wonders why Bahro, who called the Kulaks the "object of a second revolution," needed to go into exile at all.

Althusser was the most unambiguous communist of the bunch. His purpose has been to rally the Marxist faithful around a "mature" interpretation of Marxism, rejecting any lateral dalliance (*e.g.*, with Christianity) and especially any recourse to the romanticism of Marx's early work. Althusser was extraordinarily successful for a while in persuading many half-educated welfare-state intellectuals that Marxism constitutes *the* definitive social science. His influence has now waned, in part because his clinical madness is now established, but also because his beloved French Communist Party has declined.

His technique has been twofold. First, an astonishing structure of coercive jargon has been erected around totally unrevised "late" Marxian theorizing. Secondly, the voluminous literature which has punctured the pretensions of Marxist economics and politics for 100 years is coolly ignored. It is constantly claimed that Marx "proved" things, *e.g.*, that worn-out equipment has to be replaced. Such, at any rate, is one of the contentions of Althusser's famous essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." It is a comment on the powers of jargon that it can disguise as revelations ideas which must have been obvious to cavemen. Only a tradition as hostile to criticism as Marxism could engender such bovine idolatry.

Jurgen Habermas belongs to this same jargonocracy. In prose at once empty and pretentious he sings the same song as Herbert Marcuse. Positivism, empiricism, and technicism are the source of our woes. This is like saying that the trouble with civilization is civilization; but the answer—and compare this with Althusser—is a return to *early* Marx, for the restoration of a critical reason. This insubstantial romanticism probably has no end in view other than its own perpetuation. Scruton does not note that German neo-Marxism has virtually abandoned all soteriological aspirations, a drastically reduced viewpoint found also in semi-Marxist writers like Basil Bernstein in England or Pierre Bourdieu in France. On reflection, however, this may be just as bad as the worship of a purely hypothetical future. The idea is gaining ground that our society is no better than the Soviet slave-state, and nowhere is this nihilism more apparent than in Germany, where its disastrous potential for foreign policy is all too apparent.

The Frankfurt School may also take the "credit" for the Baader-Meinhof insanity, an afflatus which in mindless, rootless wickedness exceeded even the IRA or the modern Arab assassins. Habermas and his crew have popularized the idea that capitalism has "a crisis of legitimacy." The truth is that free societies are not threatened by their economic (*i.e.,* capitalist) institutions, which their citizens freely endorse, but by their intellectuals and semi-intellectuals; whilst in socialist societies, where these cranks are permanently in the saddle, there is a *permanent* crisis of legitimacy.

Scruton does not hesitate to praise where he thinks praise is due. The essay on the late Raymond Williams stands rather on its own. Williams used to be a good socialist literary critic in the solid British tradition. Scruton writes with real affection of the early output, a sort of mid-twentieth century atheist version of William Morris. To maintain the continuity of his golden-age myth, his stylized romanticism, Williams raided the vocabulary of the continental neo-Marxists. His understanding of capitalist society was always thin, however, and he declined visibly since his appalling misinterpretation of Orwell in the late 1960s. Perhaps British radicals should dream up a theory of their own.

Certain themes emerge, sink back, and re-emerge throughout these remarkable essays. The critique of the Marxist theory of power is one: a strange theory, indeed, which sees power as like some boil requiring revolution's lance. The work of Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons reveals the miserable inadequacy of this approach, and their writings are only the latest (sociological) layer in more than two millennia of profound political reflection. Power is the indispensable medium of social life. Civilization is the art of softening and containing power. The abolition of power is a murderous and sentimental fantasy.

Sentimentality is another repeated charge which Scruton levels against the socialist tradition. He is right. One knows that there are many worthy souls who would rather that all the people of South Africa starved or be burnt alive than that the present system should survive even in profoundly modified form. A sentimental view of race and racism has prevented their noticing that South Africa's is a relatively mild tyranny by most standards. For decades sentimentality kept at bay the evidence about the Soviet Union and then China, Cuba, and so on.

Scruton also rightly charges many of these gurus with paranoia. He could have been much harsher—some of the most notable minds in the Marxist tradition are clearly unhinged. In the case of Sartre and Althusser something like clinical madness is apparent. Hatred, bad faith, intolerance, and insanity seem to form the psychological underpinnings of totalitarian socialism with such monotonous regularity that one is inclined to doubt the wisdom, in this case, of applying the old scholarly proscription on the *argumentum ad hominem.* Certainly evil is integral to the whole exercise. The truth is really summed up by Brecht's observation that the more innocent Stalin's victims, the more they deserved to die. Brecht, like Marx, Sartre, and Althusser, did not get the chance to kill many people directly. Lenin and Stalin, Rakosi and Mao, Pol Pot and Castro did, though, did they not? They mostly went to college, first, too!

Partisans All

David Felix

The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s, by Alan M. Wald, *Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987. xiii + 440 pp. $32.50 (paper $12.95).*

IN THE 1930s an attachment to Leon Trotsky preserved for a valuable moment, Professor Alan M. Wald persuasively argues, the Marxian character of a major group of New York intellectuals as they recognized and condemned the enormity of Stalinism. Comfortingly, it also preserves the balance of Wald's personal Marxism, at least up to the moment when he completed his book, although he has been forced to yield up his intellectuals to apostasy. Conscientiously censuring them, he appears confident that he will not eventually follow their course.

Wald writes from "a contemporary Marxist point of view," while "reasserting the possibility and potential of a tradition of radical political and cultural activity that is both Marxist and anti-Stalinist." He insists upon the "profound difference" between the upper-case "anti-Communism," defined as "opposition by revolutionary Marxists to Soviet Communism" under Stalin, and lower-case "anticommunism," parenthetically and breathlessly defined as "(in the United States, an ideological mask for discrediting movements for radical change and supporting the status quo by amalgamating those movements with Soviet crimes, expansionism, and subversion)." Lacking the culture of a Lukacs or the philosophical imagination of a Gramsci, however, Wald is unable to use his Marxism for more than a hobble to thought. His vision sees little more than a struggle against the evil of capitalist "hegemony," one of the most used-up commonplaces of recent Marxian or pan-Marxian idiom.

Wald's vision fails to penetrate as far back as the nineteenth century, and his Marx is mediated by twentieth-century thinkers and enemies of thinking. Indeed, his heroic Trotsky remains a blurred image lost in the mists of the earlier twentieth century. Moreover, Wald finds Trotsky in serious theoretical error. Ahistorically writing history, Wald offers an ideological exercise about a selectively seen past.

In justifying his book, Wald begins by variously damning the numerous other competitive studies of the New York intellectuals. Thus he attempts to trivialize Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Sons: The New York Intellectuals and Their World,* reviewed in *Modern Age* (Spring 1986) justly and favorably by Paul Gottfried. Emphasizing ideology, Wald falsely suggests that Bloom limited himself to an ethnic success story "in terms of upwardly mobile Jews." Actually, while examining essentially the same group, Bloom has produced a straightforward account sensitively evocative, as Wald's is not, of the intellectuals' antecedents, personal culture, and individual humanity. Nevertheless Wald himself has written a work of value.

First, however, other delicts must be addressed. In the Marxian tradition Wald uses the *ad hominem* if nothing else will do. Because the philosopher William Barrett saw the danger of dictatorship in socialist revolution irrespective of a Stalin, "it is . . . doubtful that Barrett understands, or even understood, the basic Trotskyist critique of Stalinism." James Burnham "settled upon a vulgar anticommunist ide-