

Original Paper

Stuart Hall and the Self-Renewal of Social Critique

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Abstract

The slogan “back to Marx” always appears during every crisis cycle of Marxism. However, the idea of a return to Marx is problematic because each generation that embraces a critical approach is faced with new conditions and questions that have changed.

Employing the work of Stuart Hall is a particularly fruitful means of updating Marx because it provides us with suitable guidelines with which to re-employ Marx. Hall calls for a Marxism without guarantees that renounces historical-philosophical ultimate justification. He calls for a form of Marxism that engages in theoretical, social and political conflicts and that takes Marx seriously, not just in his strengths, but also in his weaknesses. Consequently, he sets out an approach that could truly provide a foundation with which to undertake the self-renewal of social critique. In this essay we want to find out how to revitalise a fruitful engagement with Marx by utilising Hall’s writings.

Keywords

cultural studies, marxism, political strategy, materialistic human rights discourse, crisis of neoliberalism, stages of capitalist development, dialectics of anti-capitalism

1. Introduction

Neoliberal hegemony is facing a blatant crisis (Kalmring, 2016). Britain leaving the European Union, the crisis in European refugee policy, and the financial and debt crises (both of which are still virulent), are tangible manifestations of the crises facing neoliberal hegemony. They are also indications of the declining creative power of the neoliberal political model and its dwindling power to embed. Moreover, the neoliberal bloc only manages to tackle the problem complexes that it generates to a limited extent and in a manner that is moderately acceptable to a broad section of the population (see Backhouse et al., 2013).

Antonio Gramsci would have argued that the present situation demonstrates that the ruling bloc of

neoliberalism is in danger of losing its leading position. Gramsci viewed hegemony not as static but as under constant contestation. Gramsci stressed that hegemony falls apart when efforts to win over the active or passive consent of larger sections of the population become increasingly complex and costly (see Gramsci, 2011). In these situations, the social bloc that had been dominant until this point loses its ability to constitute its own material and cultural interests as those of the whole of society as well as its capacity to reach different classes and groups through the “appropriation of an alien will” (Marx, 1973, p. 425; emphasis in original). It is precisely in this sense that neoliberalism is losing the initiative because it is no longer in a position to drive the whole of society. Furthermore, neoliberalism can no longer incorporate society within a sustainable version of its own self. As such, whether neoliberalism will be able to recover its capacity for action, and, if so, the extent to which this will be possible, remains to be seen.

Can the Left—or at least sections of the left-wing political spectrum in Europe—respond appropriately to the weaknesses within neoliberal hegemony? And, is the Left in a position to gain politically from the manifest economic and political instability of the current market-radical formation of capitalism and develop and offer an attractive vision of a new society? At best, it can currently do so to a limited extent. The crisis protests—which have adopted their own distinct forms since 2008 in parliaments, trade union buildings and on the streets—have clearly demonstrated that the Left’s capacity to organise is as limited as its ability to intervene with foresight and creativity in contemporary conflicts. In fact, the Left’s lack of a voice has become tangible in the face of the Brexit vote—the same could be said of the 2016 crisis in European migration policy—as has the difficulty the Left faces in introducing appealing socio-political alternatives into the political debate.

Faced with this situation, it seems fitting to question the Left’s carefully practised political forms and modes of thinking and to try out new things, albeit without jettisoning what has long proven useful (Hawel & Kalmring, 2016). An awareness of the need to do so appears to be growing throughout different sections of the left-wing spectrum. The intense debate that Didier Eribon’s *Returning to Reims* (Eribon, 2013) triggered can certainly be understood as indicating that much of the Left would like to see a debate take place on strategy, political forms and ways of interpreting social reality—particularly in the context of the growing levels of right-wing populism in Europe. In fact, this debate is becoming increasingly urgent, at least if the Left intends to do more than merely limit the distortions and excesses of neoliberal capitalism and their political consequences, and once again effectively challenge domination (Kalmring & Nowak, 2009; Kalmring, 2012).

2. The Need for Action Aimed at Strategic-Political and Theoretical Renewal

Let us take a short journey back through time in order to develop a better understanding of the task at hand. Around 40 years ago, Louis Althusser posed the Left with a challenge (see Althusser, 1978). As had many before him, Althusser emphasised the deplorable state of left-wing politics, and spoke of the crisis within the dominant form of Marxism, which, he argued, was linked to the Left’s political plight.

However, in a manner that some viewed as provocative, Althusser welcomed the crisis within left-wing theory and praxis. He stressed that crises not only led to risks, but opportunities, because they clearly exposed problem structures, contradictions and shortcomings that had built up over a long period. Therefore, crises provide opportunities with which to—potentially—tackle problems that have existed for a long time. If this happens, something vivid can be released again.

Althusser believed that a close relationship between political and theoretical praxis was out of the question (Althusser, qtd. in Debray, 2008, p. 88). Left-wing politics, he argued, had to be embedded within a long-term political strategy if it were not to become disoriented and lack clear direction. Nevertheless, without a theoretical foundation, left-wing politics would be unable to develop a viable strategy (*ibid.*). As such, the crises of the Left not only helped identify accumulated deficiencies; they established the theoretical and political-practical necessity with which to find new answers to new problems (Monal, 1999, p. 64). If we follow Althusser's line of thought, the tasks associated with strategic and theoretical renewal cannot be approached separately, despite the fact that they are subject to their own modes of operation, at least in some respect. Ultimately, processes of strategic and theoretical renewal, therefore, are deeply interwoven and need to be situated within a vibrant dialogue of reciprocal renewal.

Althusser viewed Marxism as the undisputed framework of left-wing renewal. This view is no longer a matter of course. In left-wing circles, Marxism faces serious competition. Whether it is post-structuralism or Monetary Keynesianism, post-colonialism or queer feminism, Marxism—even in its diversity—currently faces genuine alternatives. On the one hand, the fact that Marxism provided a source of legitimacy for projects of dominance during the 20th century certainly causes questions to be raised (Euchner, 1983), as does the fact that Marxism exhibits certain theoretical problems that have yet to be solved. For example, there is still a need for clarification with regard to fundamental categories of Marxian theory, such as value, price and monetary theory (Kräke, 2007). The same applies to the issue of gender relations (see Werlhof, 1991). Moreover, as with other theoretical approaches, Marxist debates remain strangely separated from political praxis (Zelik, 2016). The debate is often divided into theoretical analysis, which remains relatively without reach, and political action. Despite all of these moments, materialistic-dialectical tropes are of course still present and are (at least partially) proving to be very fruitful theoretical approaches (see Therborn, 2007). In addition, Marxism continues to have a significant presence in universities in the English-speaking world, and its strength goes far beyond the present standard, e.g., in Germany (Honneth, 1999). But even in Germany, the Marxist body of thought is common in some disciplines, such as social geography (Zeller, 2004) and development studies (Franke, 2004). Nevertheless, the current state of Marxist thought means that it is essential to explain why Marxism—of all things—should provide the foundation for left-wing renewal. As such, it is also vital to demonstrate that Marxism can always be (and will always be able to be) usefully inserted into the praxis of current and future generations of social critics (Larrain, 1986). However, this requires debate about issues such as which approach should be employed when working with Marx today. It is

here that Stuart Hall can help us refine our positions and hammer out our arguments.

3. Stuart Hall: Within Shouting Distance of Marx

More than any other individual, Stuart Hall was and continues to be the defining face of cultural studies. His references to Marx, however, need to be understood within the framework of the overall concerns of cultural studies as a theoretical project. Cultural studies has been strongly influenced by the linguistic turn, and this has resulted in a focus on the discursive, symbolic and cultural dimensions of social reality, although this has not resulted in abandoning analyses of material and economic processes. Nevertheless, cultural studies is constrained by a focus on constructions of gender and ethnic identities, sexual orientation and the formation of Eurocentric discourses. Moreover, it is particularly interested in media, linguistic and cultural phenomena. The guiding question for representatives of this approach involves an analysis of the distribution of knowledge and power, on the one hand, and the possibilities for subversive practices, on the other.

It was only possible to call Stuart Hall a Marxist in the strictest sense during a short period of his life (see Sparks, 1996; Hennessy, 2000). Between the late 1960s and the early 1980s, Hall continually grappled with Marxian works, always endeavouring towards the foundation of an “open Marxism” (Mandel & Agnoli, 1980) or a “Marxism without guarantees” (Hall, 1996a). Hall rejected the “lazy Marxism” (Hall, 1978) of the old orthodoxies, which had attempted to force the world into a tight conceptual corset. In fact, he argued that a renewed Marxism would have to distance itself from its more traditional forms. Moreover, a renewed Marxism would not only have to be capable of grasping the real complexities of capitalist social formations, but also the fact that historical development is open-ended, not arbitrary. As such, Hall was searching for a Marx without the safety net provided by the philosophy of history; nothing more, nothing less (Hall, 1996a).

Hall distanced himself from Marx early on because of the doctrinal character of Marxism during the 1950s. It was only with the advent of the New Left and the “disintegration” (Hall, 1996b, p. 263) of the major orthodoxies within Marxism in the 1960s that Hall’s initial distance to Marxian works began to fade (see Sparks, 1996). In this regard, Hall’s re-embracing of Marx is comparable to the current situation—Hall even pointed this out himself (see Hall, 1996b, p. 263). Today, as then, once-dominant forms of Marxism are beginning to disintegrate and this is opening up opportunities with which to reappropriate Marx.

Hall dealt with the process of renewing Marxism in a manner which is interesting for us. First, he attempted to analyse concrete social phenomena in an actionable form to be able to intervene in conflicts (Opratko & Niggemann, 2015). Second, in contrast to orthodox variants of Marxism, Hall sought to develop Marxist analyses that could account for the historically open-ended—not random—character of history (Hall, 1978). Third, he kept sight of both Marx’s strengths and weaknesses and refused to negate Marx’s problematic aspects. All three of these approaches can be employed as guidelines to develop a productive exchange with Marx’s works during the current crisis

of Marxism.

In keeping with the tradition of the Anglo-American New Left, Hall never idealised Marx; instead, he always saw Marxism as “a problem, as trouble, as danger, not as a solution” (Hall, 1996b, p. 263). Moreover, Hall cogently illustrated the weaknesses of classical Marxism and its points of friction using a cultural studies approach:

“the resounding silences, the great evasions of Marxism—the things that Marx did not talk about or seem to understand which were our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic. These were always-already, instead, the things which had imprisoned Marxism as a mode of thought, as an activity of critical practice—its orthodoxy, its doctrinal character, its determinism, its reductionism, its immutable law of history, its status as a meta-narrative” (Hall, 1996b, p. 264).

In the face of the striking problems Hall identified within Marxism, why did he still want to continue working within “shouting distance of Marxism”? (ibid.). His reasoning is still of interest to us today. Hall put forward powerful arguments that continue to be valid and justify a critical yet intensive dialogue with Marx. Hall argued that Marx had placed fundamental problems of contemporary social critique on the agenda. These included ‘the power, the global reach and history-making capacities of capital; the question of class; the complex relationships between power [...] and exploitation; the question of a general theory which could, in a critical way, connect together in a critical reflection different domains of life (ibid.). Moreover, Hall used Marxist thinking to develop profound analyses of all of these phenomena, a point that underlines the productive character of Marxist categories.

It is easy to expand on Hall’s list of reasons why we should work within shouting distance of Marx. Far from providing an approach that lacks practical relevance, Marxist theory has a critical problem-focused dimension at its disposal. It connects a means of tackling and intervening in social contradictions with what “Ernst Bloch called the principle of hope—the utopia of a more just society free of domination which we will probably never reach, but should nevertheless aim for” (Wippermann, 2008, p. 9; translated by the authors). Marxian theory supplements rational analysis of the existing with the provision of a point of reference for every-day political action and a long-term strategy with which to overcome current society. With its focus on social reproduction and social form of labour, it highlights and ingresses into relationships and dynamics that need to be at the centre of critical social theory (Köfler & Wienold, 2001). Moreover, as a theory it provides a broad set of analytical tools that are patently capable of capturing the power and limitations of the bourgeois system (Gerlach, Kalmring, & Nowak, 2003). In principle, Marxist theory can also reconcile these general insights with particular forms of capitalism (Backhouse et al., 2013). Clearly, Hall was right: we should no longer hide behind the standard set by Marx, as doing so would mean unnecessarily foregoing fruitful theoretical and analytical tools.

4. Updating Marx

The reasons stated above represent why we believe turning to Marx and Marxist approaches at the

current time is just as useful as it appeared to Hall in the mid-1960s. Nevertheless, the historical conditions under which this turn could take place differ partly from those that confronted the New Left in the 1960s (Gilcher-Holtey, 1995), and, therefore, to those that confronted Stuart Hall. This also means that the tasks and challenges associated with re-appropriating Marx are also slightly different. In our view, there are four core fields in Marxism that need updating.

4.1 Take on New Theoretical Challenges

Capitalism repeatedly reinvents itself during its crises (Shaik, 1978). The high speed and reach of attempts to reconstruct capitalism that have taken place since the structural crisis of capitalism (Altvater, 1983) began in the 1970s have led to unprecedented changes. Among other things, these changes have been viewed as constituting a “landslide” (Hobsbawm, 1994). Whether the crisis that erupted in 2008 within bourgeois society’s radical free-market capitalism will, in a similar manner, put a new face on bourgeois society (Hirsch & Roth, 1986; translated by the authors) will become clear in the next few years (Backhouse et al., 2013).

Even though the structural crises within the capitalist mode of production lead capitalism to adopt a new shape, its core structures remain intact. At the same time, such fundamental processes of societal transformation more or less automatically lead to crises in knowledge production, since the old “habits, attitudes, expectations, certainties” (Haug, 1985, p. 23; translated by the authors) no longer apply. Theoretical uncertainties can only be overcome through active theoretical work. Undoubtedly, much has been done in recent years to further the understanding of capitalism’s current stage of development. Many interesting analyses such as the regulation approach (Jessop, 1982; Hirsch & Roth, 1986), *Landnahme* theory and the theory of social acceleration (Dörre, Lessenich, & Rosa, 2015) have enriched debates about neoliberal capitalism. Yet there is no denying that none of these debates has sufficiently captured the current form of capitalism (see Krumbein, 2009).

This problem is amplified by two issues: on the one hand, the restructuring processes that have taken place within capitalism and which were initiated during the 1970s do not seem to have led to a clearly defined post-Fordist mode of production or of life (Bischoff & Herkommer, 2003, 82f.) that is comparable to the distinct contours provided by Fordism. Therefore, it seems better to speak of a crisis of Fordism and not of post-Fordism. The portrayal of the new capitalist formation still has a somewhat amorphous character. The instability and the speed of change that is occurring to social processes mean that it is difficult to produce a precisely and theoretically capture the current mode of production. In addition, these changes complicate a cumulative mode of working in left-wing knowledge production.

On the other hand, Stuart Hall pointed out that the Left has lost a large part of its own terminology and vocabulary. Neoliberalism has “changed the currency of political thought and argument” (Hall, 1988, p. 40). These circumstances are clear from the fact that freedom is now equated with the free market and that solidarity is no longer practiced between people but with locations of industry. Left-wing terms are also considered antiquated. This situation hinders the dissemination of left-wing analyses and hampers the development of left-wing theory because appropriate categories and analytical tools have to be

partly developed anew and embraced once again.

4.2 *The Search for the Subjects of Social Liberation*

With the changes that are occurring to capitalism, the classical references to the once-courted subjects of social liberation have fallen into crisis (Deppe, 2006, p. 22). Examples include the classic proletariat or anti-colonial liberation movements, which for a long time were central points of reference for many left-wing debates. Now that these subjects have begun to dissolve—at least in their *old forms*—even the self-understanding of the relationship between left-wing theory and praxis has been shaken. Marxism was aimed at serving (as) the theoretical self-understanding of the most progressive sections of subaltern groups (see Manifesto of the Communist Party). Its attractiveness lay in the fact that it combined a theory of capitalism with a critique of the ideological self-descriptions of bourgeois societies and, beyond this, provided the framework with which to enact political-strategic issues by accommodating a form of political praxis conducted by social movements. In the view put forward here, Marxist theories were to associate with social movements so that they could more strongly penetrate the fields (shaped by conflict) in which these movements appeared. Marxian categories were to enable subalterns to use reflection and to become aware of the latent opportunities that existed within their actions, and of their own goals, as well as the obstacles that stood in the path towards achieving them (Markus, 1980). In Marx, theory is aimed at providing “self-clarification (critical philosophy) to be gained by the present time of its struggles and desires” (Marx & Engels, 2005, p. 145). Therefore, theory forms part of a politics of self-liberation undertaken by society’s direct producers.

If Marxian theory loses its close connection to social movements, its relation to praxis becomes loosely and indirectly mediated (Larrain, 1986). When this occurs, it can only play a limited role in subaltern self-enlightenment. Therefore, new insights need to be brought in from the outside into subaltern struggles (Hawel & Kalmring, 2015). Moreover, this situation also leads Marxian theory to lose an important theoretical corrective as well as a motor of its own development (Gorz, 1970). If Marxism is to become more than an ‘underground Marxism’ (Labica, 1984), in other words, if it is to develop out of its niche existence, it needs to adopt a form that enables social actors to embrace Marx’s analytical tools on a large scale again and to reshape them according to their needs. Consequently, it is essential that interpretations of the world and attempts to change the world are once again strongly linked to each another in the sense set out in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.

4.3 *Take up the Challenge of “Left-Wing Mourning”*

Today’s Left faces the task of conducting a comprehensive form of “left-wing mourning” (Dubiel, 1990; translated by the authors). The Left is burdened by dashed hopes, and its past has been repeatedly marked by false starts. “We are surrounded by shattered myths, failed experiments, unfulfilled predictions, and theoretical and practical disappointments” (Claudin, 1979, p. 219; translated by the authors). During the 1980s, Ralph Miliband drew up a list of disillusioning events of this type:

“[...] the experience of ‘actually existing socialism’, Czechoslovakia and Afghanistan, the collapse of Maoist illusions, Cambodia and the sour aftermath of victory in Vietnam, the withering of

Eurocommunist hopes, the emergence of the ‘new social movements’ born of dissatisfaction with the limitations of traditional labour and socialist movements and parties, a growing disbelief in the capacity of the working class to be the agent of radical social change, and a consequent ‘crisis of Marxism’. More specifically for Britain, there is also what has for many been the trauma of ‘Thatcherism’ and, even more traumatic, its ability to win elections” (Miliband, 1985, 6f.).

The long shadow cast by Stalinism and Maoism is of particular relevance today: “In the view of many of the people who could benefit from Marxist theory and politics, Marxism has been discredited” (Eagleton, 2002, p. 3; translated by the authors). The collapse of the Eastern Bloc countries not only clearly demonstrated the limited viability of an endeavour to develop an alternative to capitalism that was linked to Marxism, but also its enormous human, political and environmental costs (Godelier, 2000). This leads to the question of the possibility of a “dialectics of anti-capitalism” (Haug, 2007). Is the root of the swing away from emancipatory aspirations to renewed repressive rule, which has often been described, rooted in certain moments of the Marxian approach (Castoriadis, 1987)? Or, is it perhaps based on specific political forms that the Left have repeatedly adopted for its organisation (Narr, 1980), such as the concept of the vanguard party?

In the 20th century, Marxism clearly demonstrated two faces (Euchner, 1983). Therefore, it would be wrong merely to reduce it to its forms characterised by domination. Marxism has inspired aspirations for liberation and legitimised domination; both aspects belong to its history. But because of this, “naive anti-capitalism” has lost the innocence it initially embodied (Haug, 2007, p. 12), as it ignores the dead ends that also constitute left-wing history. Therefore, first, we follow Oskar Negt’s suggestion that new readings of Marx should not be based primarily on intellectual originality, but on “a *moral choice*” (Negt, 1998, p. 52; emphasis in original). Consequently, even people who had “absolutely nothing to do with the theoretical distortions and the Marxist-Leninist legitimisation provided to criminal acts” must take on responsibility “for *everything* that has been done in Marx’s name throughout the world” (ibid.; translated by the authors). As such, it would be wrong of the heterodox Left to retreat into a position that implied a lack of responsibility, since the assumption of responsibility is not tied to the issue of personal culpability. Second, we view the moral choice as a prerequisite to enabling Marxist politics to gain credibility on a larger scale in public discourse. Third, in our opinion, the adoption of this approach represents an important lever with which to explore the possibility of a dialectic of anti-capitalism. Self-enlightenment via suitable mechanisms is essential to the self-renewal of left-wing politics and theory in the post-communist era (Haug, 2007).

4.4 Develop Concrete Utopias and a Materialistic Human Rights Discourse

Since the collapse of centrally-planned economies in 1989, critical Marxists have faced a problem. It is no longer merely enough for critical Marxists to differentiate their views from the concept of socialism that was advocated in the Eastern Bloc. Instead, it is high time that the Left positively stated what it is seeking to achieve (Negt, 2003, 70f.). The widespread belief that there is no alternative to existing society and that we have arrived at the end of history means that we need to take up the task of

seriously defining real possible alternatives. Since Marx, there has been a widespread taboo among the Left about developing imagery of the post-capitalist society that lies beyond the horizon; this approach needs to be reconsidered (Narr, 2009). People have a right to tangible policies, and they should be able to develop their own ideas about the viability and desirability of a proposed post-capitalist alternative. Nevertheless, we are not advocating a revival of classic utopianism, rather “concrete utopias” (Bloch, 1996b), not “grand structures and detailed picture of the future”, but a clarification of “core structures of society that differ in principle from those of the present” (Dutschke, 1968a, p. 6; translated by the authors). Whereas classic utopianism merely contrasted its vision of another society with the existing one, a concrete utopia defines the “possible extent” of alternatives (Kräke, 2006). Moreover, they are based on current society’s material and subjective tendencies and latencies, and take these positions as their starting point for social change (Bloch, 1996b).

Classic Marxism focused its analysis of tendencies on the material contradictions within capitalism especially the economy and class conflicts. In our opinion, this focus should be extended to include another dimension: one that embraces the idea of “the right to walking upright” (Bloch, 1996a) that lies dormant within bourgeois thought on natural law. As such, it is time to unfold a materialist human rights discourse that places the systematic—not random—inconsistencies between civil human rights standards and human rights practices at the heart of debates (Narr & Vack, 1983; Thielen, 1995). The aim would be to emphasise the systemic differences between the human rights standards that have been developed by bourgeois societies, and reality, in order to demonstrate that when these inconsistencies are taken seriously they have implications that go beyond existing social conditions (Kalmring, 2012, 96f.). This could open up the potential for social change within the human rights perspective to Marxism and liberate it from its narrow bourgeois confines. In turn, this would not only result in a shift towards a critique of capitalism; rather, it would sharply demarcate a renewed Marxism from authoritarian variants of socialism. Finally, it would also develop a foundation for concrete utopias that could equate social equality with freedom, in terms of the self-government of the direct producers.

5. Outlook

The slogan “back to Marx” (Kuczynski, 1926; Wood, 1997) always appears during every crisis cycle of Marxism. However, the idea of a return to Marx—or to some other author, and this includes Stuart Hall—is problematic because each generation that embraces a critical approach is faced with new conditions and questions that have changed. Consequently, there can be no return to Marx, no more than there could be a return to Stuart Hall.

Furthermore, an authentic Marx (or Hall), which could be unearthed like an archaeological relic, does not exist (Larrain, 1986). Marx is an author with contradictions and fractures in his work, and he wrote texts on different occasions with different purposes (Kalmring & Nowak, 2017). In fact, a return to Marx fails on the immediate question of which Marx to return to. A contemporary treatment of Marx, therefore, could not take place without conducting its own intellectual analyses, just as it could not

even exist without making references to the challenges and issues of the day. The task of updating a project of Marxist theory and politics, therefore, can only be addressed collectively in the form of an “open Marxism”. It could not be undertaken by individuals on behalf of others; in fact, it could only be “developed through practical struggle, in the permanent mediation of reflection and action and theory and praxis” (Dutschke, 1968b, 90f.; translated by the authors).

Employing the work of Stuart Hall is a particularly fruitful means of updating Marx because it provides us with suitable guidelines with which to re-employ Marx. Hall calls for a Marxism without guarantees that renounces historical-philosophical ultimate justification. He calls for a form of Marxism that engages in theoretical, social and political conflicts and that takes Marx seriously, not just in his strengths, but also in his weaknesses. Consequently, he sets out an approach that could truly provide a foundation with which to undertake the self-renewal of social critique.

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