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Interview/ Terry Eagleton

Q. In one of your lectures that while Marx differed from his predecessors like Hegel in asserting that the history of humankind was the history of progress in the sense that the shift from one epoch to another does not merely signify material prosperity but a continual horrifying price that must be paid. He does not however deny that there is progress. In other words, the fruit of human freedom would be funded by unfreedom. This idea of progressivism in human history has been challenged by many schools of historiography more recently by post moderns. How do you make sense of their criticism?

I suppose one of the formulae that I have sometimes used is the notion of progress with a small 'p'. The notion of progress with a large 'p' is of course very problematic. Even postmodernists agree with progress with a small 'p', in a modest or a piecemeal kind of way. Progress with a large 'P' is a distinctively nineteenth century or post enlightenment concept. I think those who, like John Gray in his recent book, oppose progress as if it were a problematical a doctrinaire, don't actually tackle the case of somebody like Marx, for whom there is both progress and regression simultaneously, or enlightenment and barbarism simultaneously, as if these are sides of the same story. That is one of his distinctive contributions to as it were historiographical thinking. Not in a cynical or regressive way to deny progress but to reckon with the appalling price, as you say, we have had to pay. I think it is perhaps a more dialectical view. I think he gets it just about right. I think that is one of his contributions that he is neither a Pangloss nor a Jeremiah.

Q. The left working in the mainstream bourgeois democratic polity in certain nations of the world have increasingly been arguing for social democracy as opposed to socialism established via a violent confrontation. Marx himself would argue that different situations warrant different approach. You

yourself have argued that in some conditions establishing socialism might lead to Stalinism. Do you see this as a dilution?

Twenty or thirty years ago I probably would have said yes. But things have changed a lot, haven't they? They have changed to a point where even social democracy is more valuable and rarer, and something to be sought for and safeguarded. Just taking the parochial situation of Britain - one of the criticisms against Tony Blair wasn't that he was a socialist. Nobody thought he was. But he wasn't even a social democrat. He wasn't even in modest in minor ways. In fact, he represented a central retreat from that. And in that context social democracy would have been a very progressive move, I think.

Q. Marx is today often seen as this unchanging prophet who makes predictions and has come to be deified among some Left circles. Gareth Stedman Jones has argued this has more to do with Engels's project since *Anti Duhring*, the German Socialist Party and of course the Soviet Union and the export of an official Marx. Break it down for us. Was Marx out making prophecies or simply unpacking historical structures in trying to make sense of the way forward?

There are many different categories you can use about him. I think prophecy properly understood is quite an illuminating way of seeing Marx as a later day secular Jewish prophet, someone who in fact had read the Hebrew scriptures himself. As long as one does not equate prophecy with clairvoyance. A lot of Marx's predictions have turned out to be mistaken. Though some of the predictions in the *Communist Manifesto* such as the globalization of capitalism, the increasing polarity of rich and poor globally, have turned out to be true. But in any case, I don't think prophets are in the business of staring into crystal balls. They are in the business of saying look if you don't change your ways now there isn't going to be a future, or it isn't going to be a pleasant one. Prophets, largely in the old testament, sometimes they look into the future and issue warnings. But it's actually beamed at the status quo and I think Marx did exactly that.

Q. Let me play devil's advocate here. What many forget today is that even with burgeoning capitalism in the third world and late capitalism as some would say in the first world, Marx himself was all praise for the revolutionary nature of capitalism in overthrowing pre-existing restrictions. But over the past few decades we have seen a resilient capitalism and not one staggering under the weight of its own

contradictions, as many economists would have us believe. While it's lifeline may have come in crony form through tax concessions and government bailouts, in some countries such as the Nordic countries, it has been amenable to a more human face in sync with welfare policies albeit through government intervention. What of its inevitable downfall then?

Marx does speak in the manifesto of the inevitability of capital. It is hard to know what register he is using there. Is it a scientific inevitability or moral inevitability? Is it saying that the system would eventually get to the point where it will necessarily generate revolution because the alternatives would be better than what one has? There is a paradox about revolutions that in order to want it you must be lacking in some way, but in order to go about it you must be to some degree self-affirmative. I don't know how much Marx himself appreciated that difficult balance.

In one sense if the system does deteriorate, say a new global depression, etc., then you might say it may very well reach a point where people have nothing to lose. And people who have nothing to lose are dangerous from the viewpoint of the ruling establishment. On the other hand, whether people who have nothing to lose are capable of being effective agents, is a different question entirely. I think we ought to take Marx's remark about the inevitable with a pinch of salt. The inevitable is normally unpleasant. And of course, unless you fight it, you never how inevitable the inevitable was.

Q. You have often criticized the new atheist bloc represented by Hitchens, Dawkins and others as being Islamophobic. Some would say your criticism was valid. But in his defense, he said that he criticizes Islamism as he does with all forms of religious delusion or fundamentalism. Surely Islamism is not the same as Islam, just like Hindutva which is supported by the ruling party in India is not the same as evolving Hinduism or even early Brahmanism. The violent image of Buddhism can be, and some would say should be critiqued right.

I have no problem with that. Hitchens of course was an old comrade of mine, before he saw the light. Dawkins and he both object to religion in principle. While I want to quarrel with that in many ways, but I think that is an intelligible and defensible position. That is different from what the typical liberal would say, that all I am attacking is a monstrous distortion of Islam or Christianity for that matter. Those are two distinct positions. The second one obviously one agrees with. One attacks monstrous distortions. The first one however, is way more interesting because it catches the liberal on a tender spot. Liberal's instinct is to be inclusive and tolerant of beliefs that he or she doesn't share. In fact, it is the definition

of tolerance that you are tolerating what you don't agree with. Tolerance is it were tested and constituted by beliefs you don't agree with. So, there is something rather admirably bold, in a perverse kind of way, when people like Hitchens or Dawkins come along and say that I cannot stand any of it and whole lot is false consciousness. Ironically that position is somewhat nearer Marx, except that Marx's position on religion is more nuanced than people often think.

Q. Let me push this question a bit further. With the return of the right all over the world there has been a resurgence in religious fundamentalism. As a Marxist what would your advice to fellow travelers be? In your book you call Islamic radicalism and Christian fundamentalism as movements of masses and not just doctrines of a disaffected minority. How can you be so sure? Some would say it's merely a question of optics or visibility for that matter. It is the silent majority that the Marxist is working to organize as an antidote to this.

It's an enormously central phenomenon. It's all over the place. It is universal almost. It is best to be understood not so much as hatred but as hatred stemming from fear. A lot of hatred does stem from fear, anxiety, disorientation, resentment, truculence, humiliation and so on.

One necessary step is for the west to acknowledge its complicity in the creation of this fundamentalist backlash. Its own politics contributed in a major way. And of course, the west isn't doing that, and it won't do that. It has a got too much to lose in the process. But that is a precondition of any creative engagement with fundamentalism.

But there is a downside to the story. Sometimes the answer to fundamentalism is not liberalism or justice. Sometimes it is too late for justice. Such movements often take a deathly momentum of their own and become detached from their sources or their original circumstances and are as it were self-propelling and self-generating. We could be in that situation and we must acknowledge some responsibility for it.

Q. Let me begin this question by a brief quote from a review of Spivak's book done by you. "But if cultural theorists these days can bound briskly from allegory to the Internet, in a kind of intellectual version of Attention Deficit Disorder, it is partly because they are free from the inevitably constricting claims of a major political project. Lateral thinking is thus not altogether easy to distinguish from loss

of political purpose.” Why does the academe in present times lack the yearning to be part of a major political project? Is it because they think they are too deeply entrenched in the manifestations of global capital or is it because of the death of Enlightenment universalism as a project?

I had totally forgotten about it. She was very gracious. I think there are different responses to that. One is that I was thinking of the American academia, which has always been damagingly insulated from its social context, and that has a lot to do with some of the self-conscious professionalism of even leftists like Spivak. There is an enormous gulf in the states between common culture and intellectual culture. Such that public intellectuals are very few and far between. Even Fred Jameson does not have a public presence in the way some equivalent here might.

The other response is to say it is not only a matter of the enormous cultural divide between common society and academia, but it is also a matter of increasing integration of academia into the structures of late capitalism. The original purpose of the university as distance somewhat in order to establish a critical distance from other social practices has been increasingly eroded. The universities have become agencies of corporate capitalism in all sorts of ways. It is a paradox. It is both a gulf in one sense and an integration in other.

Q. Let me ask you to elaborate on something you have spoken about earlier. Marx as you rightly pointed out was concerned with a society of leisure and through his studies on labour. In fact, the study of the latter was to help evolve a transformative paradigm towards a society where one would be free to pursue their own dreams, a realization of their sensuous side if you will – art being Marx’s ideal of production. Why do you think this is a fine point lost of generation of Marxists who believe Marx is a prophet of doom, seeking hope while painting a stark reality which to some people is not in consonance with the whatever little happiness they can eek out? Everyone is relatively happier if the capitalist mantra is to be believed.

It has been forgotten and quite disastrously so. It is linked to the myth that Marx was concerned with *homo economicus*, on the contrary he was rather bored with economics despite spending all his time labouring away with it. It focuses on whether you try to use technology for emancipatory reasons or to increase exploitation. It can go either way. This is perhaps where Marx is fairly clairvoyant. He realizes that you could get to a point where you could use that technology in an emancipatory way and as he says towards a shortening of the working day. Something as simple as that is a prerequisite for so much.

Q. You have been giving talks, writing and arguing that Marx was right throughout your life in the academia. What is the future of Marxism in the present times?

A man who interviewed me for the Boston Radio programme felt that in the States there was a quickening of interest in Marx around the bicentenary. I don't think it is just the bicentenary. I think in the States they are still traumatized by the 2008 crash. One of the things it did was to reveal the inadequacies of pragmatism or liberalism which were the central policies. That was one of the reasons Marx came back into focus and not just for things like the occupy movement, which may have been anti-capitalist but not Marxist. Just as they announced the death of history two aircrafts hit the World Trade Centre, the invasion of Iraq, there was the great market crash, the Arab Spring, suddenly history was moving at a surreal speed and the skepticism around grand narratives was up for grabs. But we have to see what will happen.

Interviewed on behalf of JSHC by Rohit Dutta Roy.

Interviewee bio:

Terry Eagleton FBA is a literary and cultural theorist, and a public intellectual. He is also a Distinguished Professor of English Literature at Lancaster University. Formerly the Thomas Warton Professor of English at the University of Oxford (1992 – 2001) and John Edward Taylor Professor of Cultural Theory at the University of Manchester (2001 – 2008), Eagleton has held visiting appointments at universities around the world including Cornell, Duke, Yale, Trinity College Dublin, etc. Some of his best-known publications are *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996), *After Theory* (2003) and *Why Marx was Right* (2011).