



Left Behind

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Critiquing the idealism of Marxist intellectuals reveals the failures of leftist thought since the mid-20th century, writes Scott Hargreaves

To judge Roger Scruton by his demeanour and suitably tweedy appearance, it would be easy to assume he comes from a strand of British philosophy previously personified by the later versions of Michael Oakeshott; suspicious of Continental idealism and more generally, the practical claims of metaphysics and rationalism.

But through his works we see he is supremely learned in the main streams of modern European philosophy, with a framework very much grounded in the work and approach of Georg Hegel and Immanuel Kant. Before he was squeezed out of academia during the radical takeover of the universities, Scruton produced notable works of high philosophy in the field of aesthetics—rich with complexity and suitably difficult terminology.

In *Fools, Frauds and Firebrands: Thinkers of the New Left* Scruton provides a conservative

analysis of a range of continental, British and American philosophers of the left, while beginning the analysis on their ground. He knows that Marx's philosophy was a bastard child of Hegelian dialectics and French materialism, with additional DNA from Ricardo's labour-theory of value, and writes:

Marx's 'materialist' theory of history was a response to Hegel, who had seen the evolution of human societies as driven by the consciousness of their members, as this is expressed in religion, morality, law and culture. Not so, Marx famously wrote. It is 'not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness'

With his knowledge of Hegel and the German philosophy Marx absorbed at the University of Jena, Scruton is able to trace the intellectual lineage from Hegel to Marx via Feuerbach, then subsequent elaborations and further distortions by later thinkers such as Alexandre

Kojève and György Lukács, and finally all the way to our own era's Slavoj Žižek. Scruton's own philosophical work shows this part of Hegel's philosophical family tree is by no means the only one, and has few valid claims to be truly Hegelian. Scruton sets out to be as open to the works as possible, and by any measure is scrupulously fair. He writes, for instance, of a British Marxist historian that:

No reader of Hobsbawm's historical works can fail to be engaged by them. Their breadth of knowledge is matched by the elegance of their prose

This methodological fair-mindedness—itself a hallmark of conservatism—only makes his subsequent conclusions more powerful, and damning. Scruton's approach also produces a degree of psychological insight that helps explain how so many of the intellectuals studied are driven by alienation, cultural relativism, and resentment (the resentment examined by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche).

These tortured geniuses of the left find their subjectivity unbearable and the meaning of life elusive, and the existential nausea this produces is conveniently attributed to the modes of expropriation embedded in capitalist society. Their politics must be revolutionary and totalitarian because they seek not so much a political outcome as a transformational act of grace. Sartre is the prototype of this otherwise inconsistent leap from a fiercely individualistic philosophy to an embrace of revolution and neo-Stalinism.

There are three features of Marxism that endeared it to Sartre. First, a philosophy of opposition through and through, saturated by a quasi-religious contempt for the 'bourgeois' order. Second, it is total in its solution and promises a new reality; obedient to a perfect conception of itself. In other words, Marxism abolishes reality in favour of an idea. Of the writers covered in this book a lucky few like Bertolt Brecht and the Hungarian György Lukács got to live out their final years in the socialist utopias they had so fervently craved. Most of the rest were condemned to live out their days as tenured academics, best-selling authors, *Guardian* columnists and 'public intellectuals' of choice for state-funded broadcasters.

Only Louis Althusser escaped this terrible fate, by murdering his wife (allegedly for her 'revisionism') and subsequently being confined to a psychiatric hospital. The epitome of the terrible life Marxist intellectuals are condemned to lead in the West is that of Jürgen Habermas, who has found the reward of a half a century of producing neo-Marxist 'sociological jargon' (in which 'tedium is the vehicle of an abstract authority') is to become the house philosopher and defender of the EU's unelected technocracy headquartered in Brussels. He has been forced to settle for the achievement of revolutionary ends by the incremental abolition of the EU's constituent nation states and of democratic freedoms. Althusser had to settle for being released three years after his act of murder, giving him much-needed peace and quiet so he could write his autobiography.

In the US the intellectual history of the left has played out in a different but no less pernicious manner. Marxist intellectuals require the existence of a 'proletariat' so they can be at its vanguard on the path to revolution, but in America this did not and does not exist as a self-conscious entity, and no amount of sociological gymnastics could bring it into being. Naomi Klein's supposedly fresh and radical attack against consumerism in *No Logo* merely recapitulated a hundred years of social critique, from Thorstein Veblen through to Vance Packard, J K Galbraith and many others. The pattern is:

Far from seeing...consumerism as the necessary result of democracy, the left has tried to show that consumerism is not democracy but a pathological form of it.

Scruton in his fair-minded and conservative way acknowledges an element of truth in the leftist critique of consumer society and the emptiness of mass culture. Indeed, he believes it merely echoes in modern times from the Hebrew bible's injunction not to bow down to false idols and thus betray our God and our humanity.

In America the left ultimately found a unique foundation on which to stand while they set about to dissolve from the inside the institutions and cultures that had made the most free and prosperous mass democracy the world has ever seen: the US Constitution.

Richard Dworkin took this urtext of American exceptionalism and rewrote its meaning and role to claim that its main clauses embody the proposition 'that men have moral rights against the state' and that therefore 'a court that undertakes the burden of applying those clauses fully as law must be an activist court'. Scruton examines the contradiction in Dworkin; that while he somehow finds these individual claims against the state as inherent in the Constitution, he can nevertheless also argue for positive discrimination, because the

Constitution creates for the citizen an 'overriding right' to be treated as an equal, which in turn means the courts must create and oversee:

A system of a handicaps and privileges, distributed according to group membership rather than the citizenship of the country or membership of the human race.



The left in America (and in Australia for that matter) have also absorbed the output of what Scruton calls the 'Parisian nonsense machine', built by Jacques Derrida and Jacques Lacan, and thereafter extended by others including Gilles Deleuze and Félix Gattari. From (Alain) Badiou to Zizek the followers of Lacan have rejoiced in the discovery that he bequeathed to us, and is easy to see why. Derrida cast doubt, in his theory of deconstruction, on the possibility of meaning anything. Lacan showed that is not necessary to mean anything anyway.

Scruton's philosophical training leaves him uniquely placed to get to the heart of why the nonsense is nonsense. For example, Lacan is feted for supposedly 'discovering' the 'mirror-stage' of human development, which is a sort of bizarre analogue of the Hegel's account of the subject's awareness that it can also observe itself as an object (the so-called self-as-other). Scruton notes how in this as in so many other intellectual 'discoveries', the thinkers of the left neither acknowledge antecedents nor address any subsequent refutations. Elsewhere he points out the 200-year-old labour theory of value that lives on in Marxist thought—despite being pulled apart by various economists including Hayek from the late 19th century onwards. Through Scruton's writing we get more than an understanding of the moral and intellectual failings of the leftist thinkers; we get an understanding of how the intellectual notions that dominate our public sphere were created, and how they are now enforced after the largely successfully Gramscian march of the left through our cultural institutions.

We understand better why classical liberals and conservatives report so much frustration when their attempts to debate the New Left finds no purchase; fundamentally because there is no shared commitment to finding the truth or even admitting that there is a truth capable of being found. We understand better why the left not only does not admit the need for debate (and for political reasons seeks to prevent it), but that it is now incapable of even using or permitting the language that admits alternatives to its ruling ideology. And finally we understand why anyone who stands against all this might, like Scruton, be occasionally mistaken for a slightly crusty anti-intellectual from a pre-modern age. For some of us, we realise this is a small price to pay if we are ever to preserve our heritage and reclaim the public sphere from the Fools, Frauds and Firebrands of the left.