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Nathancoombs's Blog

The Bankruptcy of Spiked's liberal humanism

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For my first post to this new blog I will publish a critique I wrote of the Institute of Ideas and Spiked Online journal. In short, these are the organisations which superseded the folding of the UK's 'Revolutionary Communist Party' in 1997.

The Bankruptcy of *Spiked's* liberal-humanism

Nathan Coombs

When in 1997 the Revolutionary Communist Party (RCP) renounced Marxism a startling justification was issued: that the potential for collective action had become impossible in contemporary society^[i]. It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the depth of this altercation. This was no minor rebranding exercise. This was explicitly not Marxism pursued via other means, but its transfiguration into a different kind of monster. It is only now though in our time of financial crisis, when we are moving ever closer to crony state-led financial capitalism, that the bankruptcy of our financial institutions reveals the bankruptcy of the liberal-humanism that succeeded the RCP's Marxism.

The post-Marxist *Spiked* journal (www.spiked-online.com) has represented the vanguard of the liberal humanism that has replaced the Marxism of the former RCP. What does it represent? The difficulty in ideologically pigeonholing it is one of its greatest appeals. Someone close to the 'movement' once put it to me in terms that do however make sense of the whole programme: "If we can't have communism, then we might as well realise capitalism." Such reversals and ironies are of course rife in the history of Marxist revolutionary thought, and politics in general for that matter. Iranian politicians in Israel, for instance, constitute some of the most hard line hawks against the current regime in Tehran. 'If we can't have secular liberalism, we might as well destroy our own country' being the implicit sentiment. Crossing the line is nothing new, but *Spiked's* trajectory is worthy of specific attention because the journal continues to represent the only organised remnant of the (left?) articulating original humanist responses to important contemporary issues. Working out what went wrong with 'Spiked theorem' is a matter of saving what is right with the impulse of the endeavour.

Let us start with what is so good and so intuitively appealing about *Spiked*. Their liberal-humanist ideology is unusual in our day and age: a complete and encompassing system. In a time in which politics is often marked by ad hoc responses to individual issues and matters of principle are set to one side there is undoubtedly a certain heroism in maintaining an

ideological line that conceives all issues within a totality. If I have to mark out continuity with Marxism in *Spiked* theorem this would be it. To explain: Marxism was able to shake the world because it provided a complete system that could account for more or less anything within the whole of human existence and justify coherent responses. When we pick over the history of 20th century Marxist thought what we find so fascinating from our free for all 21st century perspective is the minutiae of the debates which aroused so much passion: should there be one party or two to represent the working class, do dialectics converge or split, how long will a dictatorship of the proletariat be necessary, should an authentic 'Third World' communist party support nationalists or the Soviet Comintern? etc. etc. To all those disgruntled with the vagaries of our post-political, post-ideological age the continuity of totality in *Spiked* is a major appeal. Its focus is similarly razor sharp and you have to pick over it with a fine comb to isolate disagreements between writers. The problem with *Spiked* is not then that its pieces are monotonous identikit responses, as many claim – this is in fact its greatest strength. That said though, it is also the case that *Spiked*'s particular ideological totalisation has become the exact opposite of Marxism. – How?

If the RCP was a liberal-Marxist organisation it is an understatement to say that there is an obvious tension inherent in the formulation. Liberalism and Marxism have never been political concepts that hung together well. Marx split from Hegel not just because he turned an idealistic totality into a material one, but because as an early left-Hegelian he conceived the role of our self-consciousness of social totality as having a *responsibility to change the world*, not just reflect on the embodiment of perfection within it. Marx's later economic historical dialectic, whereby feudalism would be successively replaced by capitalism and communism, gave a reassuring narrative to the ease with which this process would take place. The experience of those movements who tried to actually realise communism in the 20th century put rest, however, to the idea that the process could be accomplished without ongoing revolutionary violence. The use of the state to reverse the relationship of power in society became the hallmark of Marxist movements.

All experience points to liberalism as being fundamentally deficient to make the change necessitated by Marxism: at both a theoretical and empirical level. Some tried to resolve this problem by differentiating between economic and social liberalism: thus the saying that the left won the culture wars whereas the right won the economic battle. To its credit the RCP never attempted such a crass partitioning. Liberal Marxism is an eclectic contradiction, yet it nevertheless holds together the necessity of social totality, if not ideological consistency. It is still Marxist because it wants to radically change the totality of social relations – somehow.

What happened when the RCP folded and dropped its Marxist portion? Totality remains in its liberal humanistic ideology, but we lose the impulse to change the world. It becomes an ideology of negative freedom: freedom *from* the state. Frank Furedi's pronouncement that no collective agency exists to change the world is critical because that said all we are left with is our individual freedoms and the drive to progress collectively to improve our individual lives through consumption as part of an abstract humanity.

Remnants of Marxist ideology exist in *Spiked*'s liberal-humanism but without any agency they have become peculiarly inert and post-modern. The working class need to be protected from prejudice and moralistic paternalism, but there is no longer any challenge to the idea that we should maintain our class system, no complaints about the decline in social mobility; in fact no pro-active political action can be taken at all. If the working class cannot represent themselves then no one should. It is rather *Spiked*'s role to protect these vulnerable souls

from having their *identity* smeared by middle class mandarins. Class war becomes class based identity politics. Like Hegel, the division of labour is seen to represent the ideal reflection of self-conscious collective-individual freedom. Any attempt to change the division of labour in the absence of a self-presenting group crosses paths with their cherished liberalism.

Ok, so far so good: at least liberal humanism looks ideologically consistent. So where does the impulse for change and progress come from in the absence of class politics or any form of political self-representation? The only game left in town of course – capitalism. Capitalism as the agency of progress must be uniquely equipped to sculpt the ideal forms of the division of social labour, assets etc. Therefore it can only be deviations from the freedom of early heroic capitalism that retards our social perfection. Capitalism left unchecked, unregulated, unrestrained, ultimately delivers us the closest to socialism we can ever aspire to get. Tesco, Primark etc. emerge as the institutions best serving the interests of the working class because they operate as closely as possible to the principles of free market economics and individuals self-representation in the marketplace. It is the flip side of the coin to ‘ethical consumerism.’

Of course, such a position is always attached to the caveat of complaint that ‘political elites’ cannot imagine the big alternative. Although why elites would want to imagine an alternative to their own eliteness is very far from obvious. In regard to the recent first hearing of the \$700 billion bailout plan for Wall Street Brendon O’Neill had this to say:

The imposition of the zombie categories of ‘free market’ and ‘socialism’ on to the bailout debate has obfuscated the real problems underlying the financial and political crisis, and made it more difficult for society to have a proper debate. First, it has obscured the fact that, for all their warlike chanting, both the small band of free marketeers and the unconvincing ‘anti-capitalists’ in the press and on the floor of the House of Representatives share much in common. Both see no alternative whatsoever to the capitalist system and agree that the best way forward is to have state-controlled capitalism; they only disagree over how much control there should be.^[ii]

The problem is that Brendon and the rest of *Spiked* fail to ever tell us either what this big alternative is, or could be. It is cryptonormativity at its height, i.e. a normative critique of the situation that refuses to ever reveal its own normative frames or alternatives. It is quite possible for the most scorned senior banking executive and bitter ex-communist to get equally worked up in agreement with this argument. Surely all to the purpose of what Frank Furedi described as the “need to regroup all those who understand that when human beings cease to play for high stakes, to explore and to take risks or try to transform their circumstances, the world becomes a sad and dangerous place.”^[iii]

The profoundly un-Marxist nature of this argument is obvious. There is even an echo of the old Frankfurt School too. Theodor Adorno –petit bourgeois miserabilist personified – renounced any direct political action and disowned his protesting students in the 1960s because, as he wrote in *Minima Moralia*: “philosophy lives on because the time to realise it was missed.” For Adorno Marxism was strangely out of time in that the time in history in which its promise of utopia could actually realise itself had passed over into the age of individualism, state control and cultural inanity. A time in which the green movement also put it: ‘has passed the point of no return.’ Sound familiar? His students right up until his death ruthlessly harangued Adorno precisely because his renouncement of revolution – of the passing by of the romantic ‘promised time’ – was part of the problem of how the ideological apparatus of capitalism perpetuates itself. Even in the 1960s, a time in which we usually

associate as being one of the most utopian and radical in human history, Adorno employed the full weight of romantic conservatism against any promise of genuine change from the status quo. The point being that just because *Spiked's* argument is draped in vaguely Marxist sounding language, as was Adorno's, does not mean for a minute that there are any genuine sympathies with Marxism as a theory of revolution. As a recent trade union activist from UNISON recently described it to me: "these people just use Marxism to further their careers in academia or wherever when in reality they haven't done a single thing to actually realise it."

Brendon and Furedi consistently deploy the same romantic 'missed moment' to justify their liberal-humanism. Basing all their critiques on the lack of this big alternative today, without ever stating ever vaguely what it could be, defaults their argument back to a status quo position. Rather than isolating the genuinely positive progressive threads in the 'Stop the War' movement, or in the populist backlash against fat-cat bankers, and attempting to develop them as politically engaged actors, they rather just decry it as childish behaviour that doesn't face up to the fact that they have no big alternative to offer. It is a purely tautological argument. *Spiked* is trapped in the limited imagination of our contemporary political horizon and critiques everyone and everything because of the fact of this limited horizon: with no apparent desire to extricate us from the vicious circle. The repetition of TINA (There is no Alternative) becomes not a stimulus to imagine an alternative but corresponds directly to its most conservative deployment: to pacify any belief in forming alternatives and encourage acquiescence to free-market, liberal capitalism. As a tautology, however, it can be free of any determinate content which would necessitate hard decisions and taking obvious sides along class lines. All we are left with is "if we can't have communism, we might as well realise capitalism." And this is in fact *Spiked* writer Daniel Ben-Ami's basic normative underpinning to his whole critique of 'cowardly capitalism.'

But what happens when faced by the evidence that there is another agency at work other than the abstract process of capitalism? This is *the* definitive point. I cannot over emphasise how critical is the following point, as obvious as it may sound, to the failure of *Spiked's* liberal-humanism. The gaping hole in *Spiked* theorem is the denial that the class interests of the ruling elite are uniquely furthered by the abstract process of capitalism, in *contradiction* with the interests of the working class. The RCP's renouncement of Marxism because of the supposed impossibility of collective action conveniently overlooks the fact that collective action at the level of the ruling elite has certainly not ceased.

Let us be honest: occasionally unbridled capitalism in the interests of the ruling elite does produce positive effects for the working class – who are after all the labour force and bare life which give power to the ruling elite in the first place. Capitalism is so uniquely successful as an economic system and an ideology because it manifests the coincidence of creating a life-force power for the ruling elite to profit from and lord over. The old supposed contradiction between workers pay and the surplus of production is over. Fordism put an end to it. The truth is perhaps much more unbearable for those on the left to face up to. The truth is that in many instances the effects of 'capitalism in the service of the elite' really are in the immediate material interests of the working class too. Once we take the classes as fixed and renounce the ambition to change the status quo – *Spiked* theorem in other words- it quickly does begin to seem like capitalism is in the best interests of all, *as well as* serving the elite. The 'good elite' is masked by the cipher of pure capitalism, whereas a 'bad elite' attempts to restrain and hold back the 'good elite,' thus worsening the lot of the working class.

But what happens when this coincidence falls apart: when the naked class interests of the elite are plain to see? During our recent financial crisis *The Economist* magazine has been the most obvious representative of the financial class. Consistently arguing against state intervention they now throw their whole weight behind a \$700 billion+ bail out plan for the banks. Opposing suggestions for pay restrictions on nationalised financial institutions they argue that \$400,000 a year is nowhere near enough to preserve the ‘talent’ at the helm of the bankrupt financial institutions. Anyone who opposes the tails I win, heads you lose scenario is an unreconstructed ‘Stalinist’ leftist.

And what is *Spiked*’s position on this massive closing of ranks at the level of governmental-financial elite – let us not also forget that Tony Blair’s hands off Third Way was rewarded with a £500,000 per year advisory contract at Morgan Stanley and that all contemporary rhetoric against bankers across the major parties is sheer cynicism – simply that those who criticise the banking system are ‘risk adverse’ and that governmental regulation is at the root of the whole problem. Those who criticise the financial class’ redistribution of wealth to itself are just exhibiting their ‘low horizons’ and timid, anti-progress inclinations. Tim Black even evokes the identity politics of victimhood to deny the agency of the class, ruminating that: “Of course crises of capitalism have long sported an unacceptable face, to use the words of Ted Heath. Let’s take only the most notorious instance of this blame game: anti-Semitism.”^[iv] And again TINA is evoked to force the conclusion: “This overarching consensus on what is wrong is no positive vision of life beyond capitalism; instead it’s a sort of reluctant statism, nationalisation by default.” The denial that there is any elite collective agency in capitalism in contradiction to the interests of the working class forces *Spiked* to articulate ever more irrelevant and ludicrous positions on the matter, even in contradiction with their own critique.

A Marxist position would recognise the interests of this class are in contradiction with those of working class; or, in more contemporary terms, we could just say in contradiction with the bulk of society. A Marxist critique that wishes to change the world would not advocate more regulation or more timidity; it would be a revolutionary option to completely change the relationship of power and wealth distribution. It would open up treasury bonds to everyone, cut out private banking institutions out, open popularly owned co-operatives for the distribution of money: the options are endless. But there is no-one representing this position, no one pushing for the Marxist position from the former RCP, because it would break the sacred pact of static self-representation of consumers in the marketplace. Because this would not represent the big alternative, the total alternative, we should put all aspirations to alter the status quo back on the shelf. Because there is not yet an agency that would carry through such radical action, we should not attempt to argue or convince people of the radical option, but simply bask in own wet contentment at the futility of the situation.

The folding of the RCP coincided with the election of Tony Blair’s New Labour. They share many similarities. Just as Blair wrote to Isaiah Berlin about the impossibilities of positive freedoms, the RCP’s renouncement of Marxism concocted a similar tale. Marxism was dead, but so too, to match the striking off of the possibility of working class agency, the ruling capitalist class also had to be rendered invisible. The consequences of this turn to liberal humanism is that *Spiked* has become the foremost apologist of the status quo: the cleverest and perhaps most devious of them all. In the absence of a big alternative, its recourse to an ideal capitalism that would serve us all equally well is an illusion. Just as this financial crisis has ended the age of innocence with regard to Blair’s cherished Third Way, it should also highlight the bankruptcy of *Spiked* theorem too.

[i] “In today’s circumstances class politics cannot be reinvented, rebuilt, reinvigorated or rescued. Why? Because any dynamic political outlook needs to exist in an interaction with existing individual consciousness. And contemporary forms of consciousness in our atomised societies cannot be used as the foundation for a more developed politics of solidarity.” Frank Furedi in LM magazine 1997, quoted by Dave Walker, *Libertarian Humanism or Critical Utopianism? The Demise of the Revolutionary Communist Party*. *New Interventions*, Vol.8 No.3, 1998. <http://www.whatnextjournal.co.uk/pages/Newint/Rcp.html>

[ii] Brendon O’Neill. 30 Sept 2008. Congress Bails Out. *Spiked*.

[iii] Frank Furedi, Ibid.

[iv] Tim Black, 30 Sept 2008. Scapegoating the Spivs. *Spiked*.

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