

# The History of the Left from Marx to the Present - Theoretical Perspectives

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Darrow Schechter, *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present – Theoretical Perspectives*, London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2007, ISBN 978-0-8264-8758-2

Darrow Schechter's new book presents a dilemma by its very title: given the sheer extent of academic discourse and historical reality that has followed from Marx, is it possible to compile an all-encompassing, encyclopaedic work, without producing over-simplifications and crass omissions?

The author tackles this issue from the very start, ensuring that the central aim of the book is clearly understood. The impossibility of a concise encyclopaedic approach to the subject matter is admitted, and an aim, which can afford not to be all-encompassing is outlined. *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* pinpoints certain moments in what might be termed the history of Marxist and post-marxist discourse, and in doing so, shows some key moments of evolution, whilst also showing how more recent elements of this discourse build on previous ones, and indeed, which elements remain as constant themes throughout.

To a certain extent, *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* is therefore of use as a work for general reference, despite its admitted omissions; but rather than chronological re-capping of previous arguments, this book presents an argument in itself.

At the outset, Schechter states the central theme of the book:

...the relationship between knowledge, left politics and human emancipation. (p. xi)

Thus, very much in the familiar style of his previous books, he examines these relationships in the context of some key discourses and their empirical manifestations. In so doing, he produces a line of thought which is certainly not exhaustive and is in fact only partially conclusive, thereby opening up extensive potential for further debate and analysis; both of the relationship between knowledge and emancipation, and also of the relationships between the main discourses of the left. By extension, *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* also presents a viable framework, within which to consider the basic discursive contours of future left-wing projects.

This feature of Schecter's book gives it a somewhat unique standing as a tool for further debate and discourse, with potentially very real social and political implications. Nevertheless, in its examination of the selected discourses, *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* will also be of interest to scholars of any of these movements in themselves, quite separate from Schecter's particular angle of more long-term analysis.

As the title suggests, the first area of examination are the writings of Marx himself, with an emphasis on both his precursors and the relationships between his writings and the rise of Bolshevism, as well as a profound section on the difference between human and political emancipation. Schecter's selectivity then becomes apparent: the next chapter deals with 'Western Marxism', centred on authors such as Gramsci and Lukacs. This part of the history of the left stands in contrast to those intellectual trends which would eventually act as major influences on the revolutionary projects in Russia, China, etc. Schecter's omission of further discussion of these trends is strikingly clear. Yet, in the light of his aim, so is his reason not to devote much attention to them:

Marxism in power has almost always been far less liberal and less democratic than the liberal democratic systems Marx criticises for being insufficiently emancipated from arbitrary power relations. (p.31)

Further on, the focus shifts to the Frankfurt School in particular, and critical theory in general. The key point of interest here is the analysis of structural transformations. On this topic, the authors of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, etc) provide the key link between the theoretical roots of the left on the one hand, and its recent emancipatory projects on the other. Not just in Schecter's view do the shortcomings of Marxism in power

lie to a large extent in the structure and hierarchy of the Soviet Union, Communist China, etc. The analysis of critical theory thus assumes its full relevance in the subsequent, aptly named chapter 'Building Networks instead of Pyramids'. From this point onwards, the focus of attention shifts noticeably from evaluation and analysis of theoretical movements to a deeper engagement with empirical events in the context of such theories: Syndicalism, Council Communism, Libertarian Socialism, the revolts of 1968 and their aftermath, as well as the Global Anti-Capitalist movements of the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century all feature in the remainder of Schechter's argumentation.

The final chapter, with its focus on the Anti-Capitalist movements, opens up debates on some profoundly important questions. Schechter evaluates these movements with reference to contemporary thinkers such as Antonio Negri, but also demonstrates that these movements still contain elements of early Marxist thought. Most notable in this respect is the concept of internationalism, modified and re-interpreted over time as a result of the myriad of social and political transformations that have taken place since Marx's death. This example highlights Schechter's interpretation of the history of the left as a political discourse, which, since its inception has been concerned with the issue of emancipation. Its evolution cannot be characterised as a dialectical, quasi-Hegelian process; instead, it is the history of envisaged pathways towards clearly defined objectives, which, as a result of several historical events, have consistently been subjected to modification, adaptation and error-analysis. The end results are present-day left-wing projects with a pressing need to resolve the potentially conflicting necessities for pluralism on the one hand, and coherence on the other:

Can the left reinvent itself [...] without losing what has been distinct about revolutionary left politics from Marx to the critique of daily life, or has the time come to say that the time of the left has passed with the crisis of the nation state and the transition from imperialism to empire? Does the left need to reinvent or abandon humanism? Can the left be both Foucauldian and pluralist as well as Marxist and rigorously coherent? (p. 212)

To anyone with an interest in such questions, *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* will be a tool of invaluable use. Not only does it show how the left has re-evaluated itself in the past. Perhaps more importantly, it partially

solves the identity crises, which have characterised the left in recent decades: through its thematic focus, Schecter's argument demonstrates that future projects and discourses of the left must, just as the more profound ones of the past, primarily pursue the objective of human emancipation. Not only does *The History of the Left from Marx to the Present* allude to this aim; it also sets out the basic parameters, within which such projects might be envisaged.

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