

Introduction

On the Dialectics of the Marxism Debate

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Whereas recent events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe signal a crisis for Marxism, which some were quick to welcome as heralding its imminent demise, there has been a growth of interest in Marxism in the study of literature here in South Africa. Along with the growth of the trade union movement and the mass democratic movement, one saw a critical approach surface, first in English literature departments – witness the edition of *Critical Arts* (3:2) on “English studies in transition” – and more recently also in some Afrikaans departments at our universities, notably at the University of the Western Cape. With the unbanning of the ANC and the SACP the Marxist literary criticism that one finds in the pages of *African Communist*, which had always been banned and dangerous to possess, is likely to make a more visible impact on the South African literary scene. Whatever may be thought of events elsewhere in the world, Marxist approaches to literature are by no means irrelevant in the South African context, and will, as we enter an era of change, increasingly become an area of debate.

It is therefore a sign of the times that SAVAL held a conference on Marxism and literature at Potchefstroom in April last year. The papers from that conference (see also *SAVAL Papers IX*, Potchefstroom, 1989) that are published here, reflect the main themes of the debate.

The main point of criticism against a Marxist approach is that it presents one with what Lyotard (1984) calls a “grand narrative”. The lines of argument are clearly drawn by Johan Degenaar: “Marxism claims that one needs a foundation to understand a sign while deconstruction allows for a plurality of interpretations.”

There are two aspects to this argument, the first being a reaction to an implied intolerance on the side of Marxism. Degenaar’s “dialogue” with Marxism is clearly haunted by the spectre of Stalinism and reminds one of the reaction by the original post-structuralists in Paris in the sixties against the Stalinism of the French Communist Party. The portrayal of Marxism as intolerant and a form of “closure” against deconstruction as the liberator that “allows”, relates to the history of communism and fears of what Marxism may become in practice – fears of what Joe Slovo (1990) in his recent article “Has Socialism Failed?” would call “distortions” of Marxism – rather than what it necessarily need be. It is therefore a political “move” that Degenaar makes rather than a theoretical argument.

The second, theoretical, side of his argument concerns the need for “grand narratives” if one is to make sense of the world at all. Whereas Degenaar claims that deconstruction allows for a plurality of interpretations, seemingly without any foundation, the need for some foundation is argued by others.

John McCallum, for instance, argues that an historical sequence of events becomes intelligible only in terms of narrative structures. In arguing that the teleology of Marx's approach to history requires the structure of romance and is at odds with tragedy, he is pointing to the type of "grand narrative" one finds in Marxism, rather than rejecting the need for one.

The role of an underlying narrative in making sense of the world, is extended to the part played by visions of the future when it comes to making sense of the present and the past. Michael Green, for instance, argues along with Jameson for the role of the utopian in Marxist criticism. In talking about future histories, he shows how historical meaning attaches itself in important ways to events beyond the present.

Cornel du Toit too recognises the need for imaginative new utopias. In his contribution one finds a tension between a post-structuralist approach that tries to operate anti-ideologically as far as possible, and the realisation that an alternative utopia is the best way to oppose any ideology.

This tension, between the need for narrative/utopia on the one hand, and the fear of closure and Stalinism on the other, is what makes the debate interesting and keeps it alive.

Whereas the main criticism against Marxist "grand narratives" certainly hits home with regard to the history of Stalinism in the communist world (whether one sees this as criticism merely of "distortions" of Marxism or not), the post-structuralist position from which this criticism is launched most strongly, is in turn open to criticism from a Marxist perspective. One sees Johan Degenaar and Cornel du Toit grappling with the famous accusation Marx made in his final thesis on Feuerbach – that the philosophers have merely interpreted the world, whereas the point is to change it.

Cornel du Toit's post-structuralist approach which tries to operate anti-ideologically as far as possible, remains in the end, to quote his own words, an "attitude that accompanies reflection". For Du Toit the struggle remains a battle of words, and it is on precisely this point that he becomes vulnerable to Marx's age-old criticism. For, even if one grants that the role of words and symbols are not restricted to the superstructure, it does not follow that change is brought about only through words. Whereas he sees a need for alternative utopias as the best way to do away with the old, the challenge of building that alternative utopia in practice, is one he does not seem ready to take up.

When it comes to practice his position is also a weak one due to its unwillingness to make choices. Since no one strategy satisfies, according to him, his answer ends up being restricted to a certain attitude and reflection, to the unmasking of rhetoric and strategies for power and the radical re-interpretation of realities and possibilities, without any commitment to practice.

Commitment to practice is also the problem with which Degenaar grapples. He faces head-on the question posed by Barbara Foley that, despite its rhetoric, deconstruction possesses questionable value as a political praxis, and that by accommodating everything, and by its very open-endedness whereby it claims to supersede Marxism, it renders itself unable to make historical

choices, incapable of deeming some activities more necessary than others “to the movement toward a general human liberation”.

His answer also remains firmly embedded in the realm of ideas. He simply “deconstructs” the difference between re-interpreting the world and changing it. Revolution on the pages of a book and revolution in the streets are both examples of texts that have to be re-interpreted, he argues. What this *means* in terms of practice, in the streets, is to guard against human beings being enslaved in both discourses. How this is to be *done*, however, without achieving hegemony for a narrative of freedom by collective action according to a common plan, he does not say. His recourse to quoting metaphors in order to illustrate the “revolutionary” nature of “the deconstructive strategy” shows faith in the power of discourse. This typically idealist approach falls short of any satisfactory answer to Barbara Foley’s criticism when seen from a materialist perspective.

The tension in this debate is therefore also one between faith in the power of ideas and scepticism of reliance on ideas, between idealism and materialism – an age-old debate that goes as far back as classical Greek philosophy. This illustrates that, whatever one may think of it, Marxism is indeed posing a crucial question which post-structuralism is still struggling to answer.

A third tension is that between the different portrayals of Marxism by the different sides in the debate. What is argued against by Johan Degenaar and Heilna du Plooy is hardly recognisable in the approaches taken by Michael Green, Wilhelm Liebenberg and Philip John. Du Plooy, for instance, talks of a Marxism that only finds a “Marxist-political” “use” of literature acceptable and would not tolerate any alternative answers to its own, that moreover deems “Marxist” texts to be themselves above ideological critique, that deems the content of literary works irrelevant and always subservient to a hidden ideology, that does not require a text to be read properly and does not consider the ability of literature to expand the borders of thinking – a picture of a Marxist approach to literature that is not only undialectical, but also in complete conflict with the writings of Marx (1975), Engels (1975), Lenin (1975) and Gramsci (1985) themselves on the subject.

One also finds her referring to Jameson as if he avers that things can only have meaning within one ideological framework. This is something very different from my reading of Jameson (1982), who simply talks of a “compelling” or “adequate” account of history.

Degenaar similarly recasts this claim that Jameson makes for a Marxist approach into a form of intolerance by caricaturing it as: “There is only one book, one code and one final interpretation”. This “*one final interpretation*” is not only belied by the diversity of approaches in the debate within Marxism; it also ignores both the dialectical and materialist character of Marxism which militates against elevating any one interpretation to being final and separable from the material conditions out of which it arises.

Where this type of portrayal by Degenaar and Du Plooy tends more to echo popular perceptions of Marxism, especially in the Afrikaans community where the debate is relatively new – witness the way in which Afrikaans writers Philip John and Wilhelm Liebenberg find it necessary to address the

problem of how Marxism is perceived – one must also acknowledge that far too often not all theorists and critics who fly the red flag are guiltless of the type of “distortions” that Heilna du Plooy ascribes to Marxism in general.

What some would call “distortions” of their understanding of Marx, may also be quite characteristic of the “Marxist” approaches of others. It is worth pointing out, therefore, a tension one finds in these papers within Marxist criticism itself. Philip John argues that the text should not be reified and treated as if it contains some imminent meaning, but be seen in its relation to its readership, and that the way the critic helps to determine that relationship needs attention. This is something with which all Marxists would agree.

Interesting and challenging as John’s alternative interpretation is, it relates a formal aspect of the text directly to the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the working class, thereby ignoring, a) the way in which a text is a product of more than just the conflict between the working class and capitalists – it is mediated by cultural, personal and other codes (as argued by Terry Eagleton (1976), and as reflected in the approach of Soviet literary theorists such as Yuri Barabash (1977)) – and b) the extent to which the struggle itself has become a more complex affair.

Lenin departed from the simple worker-capitalist dichotomy by arguing for a worker-peasant alliance. In practice revolutions have only taken place since then through even broader alliances with religious groups, intellectuals, the homeless, the unemployed and others who find themselves in the so-called “middle ground” between the state and the revolutionary movement. Practical experience has shown that most societies today cannot be realistically analysed in terms of a simple worker-capitalist opposition. In South Africa too, one sees a recognition of this in the way the SACP has entered into an alliance with the ANC, which in turn, through the UDF enters into broader alliances such as the MDM in order to get rid of Apartheid.

The way in which John relates an Afrikaans text to a simple worker-capitalist opposition therefore, notwithstanding the element of truth that it contains, runs the risk of being reductionist.

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