

Review of Walter L. Adamson. Marx and the Disillusionment of Marxism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985. x + 258 pp. ISBN 0-520-05286-4

Douglas Kellner (<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/>)

Walter Adamson begins his study of Marx and contemporary neo-Marxism with a rehearsal of Marxism's oft-cited problems: oppressive regimes which rule in the name of Marxism, the lack of a fully-developed Marxist morality, inaccurate descriptions of contemporary capitalism, and problems in the relation between the Marxian theories of history and society and visions of socialism. Fortunately, Adamson does not simply engage in another tedious demolition job or ideological denunciation of the god that failed in the manner of the French 'new philosophers' and 'post-structuralists' or one-time American New Leftists like Isaac Balbus. Instead Adamson quickly asserts Sartre's position that "'there is no going beyond" a philosophy "so long as man has not gone beyond the historical moment" it expresses' (2) and that, as of yet, we have neither transcended this historical moment nor has a superior philosophy or political ideology appeared.

Adamson's chief argument, however, is that Marxism's value today is primarily as an intellectual method that 'teaches us how to interpret social and historical reality, and to relate that interpretation to our current political concerns' (4). Adamson attempts to demonstrate the continuing methodological validity of Marxism through both a return to Marx's texts in the first half of the book, and through examination of methodological developments by neo-Marxist thinkers like Gramsci, Korsch, Lukacs, the Frankfurt school, and others in the second half of the book. Both sets of his methodological inquiries are informed and interesting, and frequently provide a fresh look at Marx's texts and at several problems clustered around Marx's method of historical and social analysis and its development by his successors in the Marxian tradition.

In Part One, Adamson examines Marx's major writings from his early 1844 Manuscripts through his late political writings and attempts to show that Marx's corpus contains four major variants concerning his concept of history, his analysis of the relation between theory and practice and the role of theory, and his conception of the relations between production and culture and methods of cultural interpretation and critique. Adamson convincingly argues that the major difference within the Marxian corpus is between the anthropological view of history, the activist role of theory, and a view of culture conceptualized as a relatively autonomous mode of production in his early writings contrasted to later theories of history, culture, and production which emphasize the primacy of economic forces, or forms of practice, or historical laws.

Adamson's careful examination of the different positions on basic issues in Marx's writings is impressive as a textual analysis but despite his correct insistence on the importance of history for political and social analysis, his own approach to Marx is insufficiently historical and contextual. That is, Adamson often fails to show how Marx's different positions on, say, history or the role of theory in practice, generally are due to different responses to varying historical situations or theoretical tasks. That is, I would urge a more contextualist approach to Marx which perceives that Marx takes different theoretical and political routes in different intellectual and historical contexts. This contextualist approach would both stress that part of the value of Marx's writings lies in precisely their variety and diversity of theoretical and political approaches (rather than in

some supposedly 'true' theoretical or political position) and would resist trying to find the Marxist doctrine of history, production, the state, or whatever. Instead, a contextualist approach would discuss differences in theoretical or political analysis in terms of diverse historical, theoretical, or political tasks being addressed in specific contexts.

In the second part, Adamson shows how various neo-Marxist thinkers developed different aspects of Marx's own theory of history, methods of interpretation and critique, and political analysis. Here Adamson's own interests frequently come to the fore and I particularly found his emphasis on the importance of learning and education within the socialist project interesting--which I gather is a focus of some of his earlier work on Gramsci and others. But here conflicts emerged between Adamson's attempt to provide a survey and overview of various contemporary Marxian positions on the issues he choose to focus on as opposed to a desire to recommend and develop his own positions on interpretation, politics, and the role of theory in practice. He concludes with some useful proposals concerning the contributions of Walter Benjamin, Pierre Bourdieu, and the linguist Roman Jakobson to the politics of interpretation, but doesn't really develop his own position.

It is to be hoped that Adamson will more fully develop his own views in later works but I want to close with mention of what I consider to be his major problem in characterizing and appraising Marx and contemporary Marxism. Adamson generally separates Marxian methods from its allegedly flawed political ideology and ignores the fact that Marxism is a unique synthesis of theory, method, and politics. Adamson tends to ignore Marxian theory (i.e. its account of contemporary capitalism, imperialism, the capitalist state, the media and culture in contemporary capitalism, etc.). Whereas surely aspects of Marx's theory and critique of contemporary capitalist societies are outmoded or flawed, other aspects remain relevant and valid. Minimally, Marx still provides a vocabulary (as well as a method) for talking about and criticizing contemporary capitalist societies and many of his concepts, analyses, and theoretical positions are still to some extent useful and valid.

Although Adamson stresses the importance of the relation between method and politics he ignores the centrality of theory, in this sense, to the Marxian enterprise. What is needed is a careful examination and sorting out of Marx's theory of contemporary capitalist society in the light of its historical development since Marx's day. This is precisely the contribution of Herbert Marcuse and his colleagues in the Institute for Social Research (see my recent book Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism), though critical theory needs to be developed and updated again in the light of more recent historical, technological, and cultural developments. Adamson provides some useful insights into the sort of methodologies that might be used to develop a critical theory of the present age and emancipatory political responses to its problems, but does not himself contribute much in this book to the production of such theories that are of increasingly importance and necessity as we enter into the age of Star Wars.