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The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Zizek by Geoff Boucher

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**The Charmed Circle of Ideology:
A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Zizek
by Geoff Boucher**

Review by Stuart Sim¹

Neither post-marxism nor postmodernism have ever been the most precise of theoretical positions. They have their roots in scepticism and share the advantages and disadvantages of that approach. Both are reactive and resolutely anti-authoritarian in outlook and skilled at pointing out the flaws in totalizing thought, traits which are highly commendable in the field of ideology critique; but they do fall prey to relativism. The left has found these theories problematical at best, and it is not unusual for charges of neo-conservatism to be levelled against them. Now that the novelty of these positions has worn off, they are undoubtedly ripe for a historically-informed analysis that places them in a wider context of ideological change and realignment in the last few decades. Geoff Boucher offers such a critique, with the emphasis on post-marxism, which I would see as part of the wider movement we dub postmodernism. Yet this post-marxism does not ever acknowledge that there was some kind of pressing socio-political reason for it emerging, rather than just a crisis within Marxist thought itself. Instead, we have what turns into a rather bad-tempered attack on some of the movement's leading lights – Laclau and Mouffe, Butler, and Zizek – which damns them collectively as theoretically 'incoherent' (a word Boucher is fond of), implying that there is a coherent theoretical position somewhere which these theorists are wilfully contravening, or perhaps simply do not understand. All of them remain, as Boucher sees it, within 'the charmed circle of ideology', offering us little of value in making sense of the culture around us.

It is not hard to pick holes in relativism, and the theorists that Boucher treats are certainly guilty of it, but he never seems to consider why someone would feel moved to embrace what is after all an uncomfortable position for any philosopher or theorist. Were Laclau and Mouffe, et al, just being awkward we might ask, or can any justification be found for their rejection of Marxism? Boucher believes Marxism can be rescued from whatever problems it may have by reworking the theory around some of the more progressive variants of Western Marxism: Althusser is name-checked fairly respectfully, even Eurocommunism is seen to have had at least some merits. The mismatch between Marxist theory and political practice over the course of the twentieth century, one of the primary motivations for Laclau and Mouffe undertaking *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, is largely bracketed and we stay in something of a theoretical vacuum, where postmarxists are judged almost entirely on their relationship to the Marxist canon. The work of the theorists under review can come to seem rather perverse in consequence. Apparently none of them realised that they were merely 'an internal moment of the history of the Marxian tradition', thus showing themselves in need of a re-education in that tradition's virtues.

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It is a tough read overall, having started life as a Ph.D thesis, and it displays many of the drawbacks of that genre. The prose style is dense, assuming a detailed knowledge of the Marxist theoretical tradition and the often scholastic debates taking place there about the finer points of its concepts, and it is overly concerned to impress with the depth of its knowledge of the relevant literature (the Harvard system of reference is not user-friendly to the general reader). It is locked into this tradition, playing one theorist off against another with little real reference to what was happening outside this rather closed world, where there was much hair-splitting over the precise meaning of terms like hegemony or false consciousness: the charmed circle of Marxist ideologues as one might conceive of it. Doctoral work is clearly necessary if we are to extend our intellectual frontiers, but perhaps more care should have gone into how its findings were presented to a wider audience.

An alternative reading of the situation in later twentieth-century left politics is that someone had to do what Laclau and Mouffe did, because Marxism was patently going nowhere at the point they wrote *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. It would have been far easier for them to stay within the charmed circle of Marxist ideologues, shoring up one bit or other of the theory in yet another exercise in ‘saving the phenomena’ (as many did). Instead, they chose to call its bluff, and thus put into words the frustration that had been building up in so many on the left at Marxism’s increasingly depressing history as both theory and practice. *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* fails to communicate the depth of the emotional reaction against Marxism in intellectual circles from around 1968 on, the notion that it was no longer a case of just tweaking its theories one more time. Laclau and Mouffe were no isolated figures, they were more like the tip of the iceberg. Much of what they said in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* had been prefigured in the work of such as Lyotard (try his *Libidinal Economy* to gauge the extent of the bitterness and disillusion on the left post-1968).

Granted, radical democracy, in any of the forms put forward by Laclau and Mouffe from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* onwards, either jointly or separately, is a theory with a lot of gaps and no very clear programme of action, but in its defence it was an attempt to move the debate onto another terrain; to acknowledge that it was time to start again free of the deadening effect of classical Marxism. If there is incoherence there, then it is because the political situation has been constantly shifting in recent decades and no postmarxist would want to claim there is a universal theory that explains it all. To do so would be to raise the spectre of the authoritarianism and totalitarianism associated with classical Marxism, which as Laclau and Mouffe had demonstrated, had run out of credit with the new generation of thinkers.

On Butler, Boucher misses again the motivation behind developing such a theory, the need to challenge a dominant and oppressive narrative (patriarchy this time), that classical Marxism could not quite account for – or was even arguably implicated in. Whether or not Butler’s ideas are entirely consistent is less important than whether they led to a rethinking and reassessment of gender roles by her readers. The provocative aspect of her thought is unappreciated by Boucher, who demands coherence above all and treats her work purely as a theoretical construct to be judged against the Marxist canon, rather than something designed to create debate by unsettling her audience’s socially-conditioned assumptions about gender. Few feminists, or queer theorists either for that matter, are going to be persuaded that Butler can be dismissed so easily on the grounds that her ‘notion of a politics of the

performative remains that of abstract individualism, lacking in social specificity and continually wrestling with the pseudo-problem of authorial intentionality’.

Zizek draws at least some grudging respect from Boucher, although as usual the thrust of the argument is to prove the overall incoherence of his subject’s thought – such as his ‘impossible desire to recreate the identical subject-object of history’. Boucher is right to draw attention to the conflicting strands of Zizek’s thought; he is undoubtedly a slippery figure, and what Boucher calls the ‘messianic Marxism’ of his later career can give even his admirers considerable pause for thought. But what might have stimulated Zizek to adopt a post-Marxist perspective in the first place is not really explored all that much. Like Butler, much of his work is designed to provoke, and he has cast real doubt on the concept of false consciousness – on which so much of Marxism’s reading of the last century or so of world history depends.

For all that he claims his objective is to ‘radicalise postmarxian discourse theories towards a postmodern Marxism’ (whatever that may mean in real terms), Boucher delivers what is in effect a hatchet job on his targets that regards them as at best misguided. He is still seeking that elusive universal theory to cover all socio-political eventualities, and his suggestion is that we can find this if we ‘extend the historicised Structural Marxism known as Regulation Theory’ (which according to Boucher Laclau and Mouffe flirt with without drawing the correct conclusions from). However, this merely leaves us stuck within the charmed circle of Marxist ideologues, as if there were no other way of constructing a cultural theory except through Marxism. Marx remains one of the most profound cultural critics of modern times, but he has no monopoly on the development of cultural theory, nor should he be considered always to set the parameters for debate. We do have to question as well why the various interpretations of Marx’s thought in the political arena have tended to turn out quite so badly, whether this should make us wary of what lies at its base. We’ve all heard the arguments that Marx wouldn’t have agreed with what has been done in his name by the communist movement, but that merely takes us back into the endless scholastic wrangles within Marxism about what Marx really meant by such and such a passage. I am not really convinced that Boucher takes us much beyond that rather sad state.