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

Author's Reply by Geoff Boucher¹

Few authors are granted the privilege of responding directly to the sort of detailed and critical readings of their work that Paul Reynolds, Stuart Sim and Robert Sinnerbrink have given to *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* (hereafter, *CCI*). In gratefully (and I hope constructively) replying to some of their many cogent criticisms and pointed questions, I want to focus on what I take to be the central issues in their reviews, namely:

- (1) The historical dialectics of Marxism and postmarxism, that is, questions about the scope of *CCI*, its definitions of the phenomena in question, its contextualisation of this phenomenon, and its understanding of the underlying motivations and political effects of the theorists that it examines.
- (2) The recruitment of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek's ideas to "the tendency of postmarxism defined by the strategy of radical democracy" and the risk of thereby simplifying complex bodies of theoretical work;
- (3) The limitations of its synthetic alternative to this particular strand of postmarxism, especially in light of new research on Althusser, the recent theoretical revival in Marxism and the questionable nature of the gesture of replacing "class" with "ethics".

Of course, *CCI* was written at a particular moment both historically speaking and in the intellectual evolution of its author. Although Marxism, both positively and negatively, taught us that ideas matter in ways that make mere polite intellectual conversation seem like a symptom of complacency, that tradition, especially in its Leninist incarnation, too seldom distinguished, in the notion of "arguing for a line," between robust debate and polemical aggression, or between defending an intellectual position and brittle defensiveness. I accept the criticism of the polemical tone of *CCI* without reservation, but want to note that there is a significant difference between the mood of a work vitiating its insights (through polemical exaggeration, for instance) and the tone of a book prejudicing its reception.

It is striking (and by no means a bad thing) that even today, it is almost impossible to have a neutral discussion about Marx and Marxism. "Marxism" remains an intensely cathected signifier, something that, even in the absence of a work's polemical overtones, can polarise reception just on the strength of the "plus" or "minus" attached to it. No surprise, then, that Sim can speak of *CCI* as remaining within the "charmed circle of the Marxist ideologues," while Reynolds accuses the

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work of an “easy dismissal of Marxism”. A polemical tone combined with the assignment of both a plus and a minus to Marxism might, with the wisdom of hindsight, have been expected to generate a divided and contradictory reception.

The work accepts three of Laclau and Mouffe’s central criticisms of Marxism. The first of these is the argument that Marxism has not sufficiently understood the programmatic implications of social complexity, so that its political programme implies a functional de-differentiation of society that could only prove disastrous if fully applied. Late Marxism, especially Althusser, made major strides towards an understanding of this condition, but this was never satisfactorily reconciled with the philosophical assumptions that framed Marxism’s political strategies. The second of these is that value pluralism, formal equality and political liberty are effective historical realities in modern societies and that, whatever its limitations, political liberalism sets the intellectual and practical standards that any alternative paradigm must match or better in terms of its promotion of these. Marxism in the twentieth century, considered as a social movement guided by the classical synthesis, represented something like a political project that was based on the claims of justice but lacked a political philosophy. This was a condition summed up by Laclau and Mouffe in terms of the accusation that Marxism combined a Jacobin imaginary with the notion of the withering of the state in what could only be a contradictory politics. Finally, twentieth-century Marxism did not fully accept the historical and moral legitimacy of parliamentary democracy, and its mass-based mainstream remained within the framework of the Leninist reduction of representative government to the political form of capitalist exploitation. Alongside an insufficient theorisation of the conceptual implications of alliance politics – Laclau and Mouffe’s Gramscian category of hegemony – this meant a strategic aporia summed up in the endless debates between reform and revolution, an opposition that Eurocommunism, and postmarxism in its Laclavian form, tried to dismantle. These major historical reasons are presented as the legitimate motivation for the emergence of postmarxism, transcending conjunctural determinations of the phenomenon. For this reason, the study performed by CCI, whatever its allegiance to the emancipatory impetus behind Marxism, could not possibly have taken the form of an external, transcendent critique along the lines of Geras or McLennan, but had to take the form of an internal and *immanent critique*.

At the same time, CCI argues strongly that conjunctural determinants are at work in the form that this particular sort of postmarxism took. Given that Althusserian Marxism and Eurocommunist politics had sought to address all three of these major problems within Marxism, there must have been extremely good reasons for moving beyond these and into a post-structuralist form of postmarxism combined with the political strategy of radical democracy. But these excellent reasons are precisely what CCI claims not to have found in the leading theorists of radical democratic postmarxism. Instead, the moral relativism and surreptitious reductionism of the post-structuralist framework, summed up in CCI as a historicist problematic, combined with what looks suspiciously like historical repression of those aspects of Marxism that actually pointed Laclau and Mouffe in the direction of their proposed rectifications, suggest an ideological surrender to the “new times” of histrionic anti-Marxism. In framing this critique, I was particularly sensitive to the tendency of all of these postmarxists to dispense with the notion of class as quickly as possible, as if a structural conceptualisation of class could not be reconciled with a post-Marxist politics. The Althusser chapter of the original dissertation made this especially clear,

and perhaps the published form would have been better off ignoring the publisher's advice about length in order to clarify the essential political point that class, far from being an embarrassing conceptual encumbrance, must remain at the centre of any post-Marxist (to adopt Sim's terminology) politics.

Against this conceptual background, the striking thing about all of the reviews is that, despite their differences, there is unanimous agreement that the contention of the book is demonstrated in its own terms. After all, to maintain that relativism is an easy target or that others have also mounted a successful critique of this sort of theory is to concede that, reservations notwithstanding, *CCI* succeeds in doing what it set out to do, at least in its critical aspect.

These critical intentions were fairly restricted. The book is not about postmarxism as a whole but only about that tendency within the postmarxian field defined by post-structuralist theoretical methods and post-Althusserian sociological assumptions, together with the strategic programme of radical democracy as conceptualised initially by Eurocommunism and then reformulated by Laclau and Mouffe. This particular tendency was selected because its leading practitioners are academic celebrities, so that their "declaration of tendency" in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (2000) had international intellectual significance. *CCI* then reconstructs the dialectical sequence of intellectual moves that lead from Althusserianism through *this* sort of postmarxism and up to the moment of the attempted rehabilitation of universality in the year 2000. The focus is on the philosophical aspects of the postmarxian programme – a focus that, despite my preference for the materialist assumptions of critical realism, could not take the form of an external criticism but needed, for reasons already stated, to have the form of an immanent critique. At its core, *CCI* claims that the theory of discourse that frames Laclau and Mouffe's notion of hegemonic articulations is (1) central to the trajectory of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek, as indicated by the "hegemony" part of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* and (2) the root of the problematic tendency to inflate a theory of ideology with distinctly relativist implications into a replacement for Marxian sociology. This mapping of the theoretical problematic assumes some relative autonomy to intellectual questions but does not entirely separate these from historical developments. *CCI* indicates the major historical contexts in the failure of Leninism and the collapse of communism; the major intellectual contexts lie in the break with metaphysics and the concept of social complexity. At the same time, granting this form of postmarxism a legitimate motivation is not the same saying that it exhibits valid argumentation or successful politics.

An immanent critique implies, from a methodological perspective, reconstructive appropriation of the object under investigation. Sinnerbrink identifies this accurately in his review as involving the proposition that a combination of Regulation Theory, a modified version of the political positions of Nicos Poulantzas as proposed by Bob Jessop, and a theory of ideology that adopts insights from Žižek, might represent the desired theoretical synthesis. Given the restricted scope of *CCI*, this had to remain tentative and provisional, and in response to Reynolds I have to say that such a synthesis would not rule out a hearing for the way that Göran Therborn reconstructs the field in his very different work, *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* (2008), which, unfortunately, was not available while I preparing the manuscript for *CCI*.

Yet there is a tension in the simultaneous demand for wider coverage of the postmarxian field, on the one hand, and the criticism that the reading of Laclau and

Mouffe, Butler and Žižek is selective, on the other hand. Which is it? It is either a wider understanding of the postmarxian field beyond this particular current, or a deeper understanding of the extraordinary complexity of each of these individuals' projects. I do not see how a work of this length could satisfy both requirements. Of course Butler and Žižek have interesting and important things to say about queer theory and cultural formations, respectively, but I do not see that consideration of these aspects of their programmes would have significantly modified the position that CCI argued. Butler's social constructivist theory of gender, combined with her somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of the depth psychology of human sexuality (I mean, her theory of an originary homosexuality, as a counter-balance to what she incorrectly takes to be Freud and Lacan's theory of originary heterosexuality) rest squarely on the concept of agency that she develops in the context of an appropriation of post-Althusserian theories of ideology. If identity is not deposited in the wake of the subject's execution of ideological scripts, then it makes no sense to talk about sexuality as an effect of gendered role performances, or about heterosexual melancholy as a consequence of the dialectics of norm and transgression built into these ideological scripts themselves. CCI tackled these at the level of philosophical generality, because it was no part of my intentions to contradict the possibility that Butler's work also includes deep insights into the psychology of gender that can be thought of as independent of the philosophical framework deployed in the construction of her theoretical position. The relevant dimensions of this for her general theory of agency as arising within ideology are the way that she restates the Hegelian notion of the unhappy consciousness in terms reminiscent of mid-century existentialism. That was discussed in CCI. If this is "selective reading," then I protest that non-selective reading would involve a lack of the ability to select for relevance. As for Žižek, an equally complex case, Matthew Sharpe and I have recently spent an entire book – *Žižek and Politics* (2010) – trying to disentangle his multiple threads in order to propose a reading of Žižek that rescues what is important from the provocations and positions that Sim rightly sees as highly problematic.

As for constructive syntheses of new positions, these are a tricky business, and it is clear that Reynolds has advanced a great deal further along this path than I have. I shall read his work with great interest, for intrinsic reasons as well as out of gratitude for the cogent and detailed review of *CCI* and framing of that work within the wider field that he provides. Because the intentions of *CCI* were primarily those of an immanent critique and its scope was necessarily highly restricted, however, there was a limit to what could reasonably be done there without either departing from its dialectical methodology or unduly imposing on the reader's (and publisher's) patience. Sinnerbrink captures the synthetic ambitions of *CCI* very clearly in his review, although whether than will satisfy the requirements of a quite different sort of book is open to question. But let me say something about ethics, since it is clearly so much of an irritant as to elicit long quotations from occasional briefing notes and seminar papers published on the web, as opposed to extended citations from the book under review.

The moment of the publication of *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* marked a theoretical retreat within this tendency from the aggressive anti-universalism of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. I suggest that this was symptomatic of a much wider recognition amongst the proponents of post-structuralist theory that the persistent normative deficit of that sort of relativism had become a serious problem now that Marxism was marginalised, and the real task was to elaborate an alternative

to liberalism. It is remarkable that both Butler and Žižek have turned very strongly towards ethical programmes – Butler with her notions of moral responsibility linked to what looks to me like a consequentialist position; Žižek with a sort of universalism that, although it claims a Hegelian provenance, locates its Hegel interpretation within an extension of Kantian deontological reasoning.

The reason, as I understand it, is this: if theories of ideology were intended to explain the existence of social agency through their introduction of historical contingency into what had hitherto been a closed form of neo-functionalism; then the question of agency, when located in the subject through a theory of ideology, necessarily reintroduces issues of accountability in its wake. Far from being a problem, this provides the opportunity to rectify the normative deficits of postmarxian theory – but only if the over-inflation of the category of ideology, diagnosed at length in *CCI*, is first corrected. Uncorrected, this will indeed be the position that makes “a notion of ethics ... permeate and occupy the space where Marxists might put a politics of class and post-Marxists, under Boucher’s critique, a concept of ideology”. It is no part of the agenda of *CCI* or my work subsequently to substitute one over-inflated category for another, but rather to try to tease out elements of a new social theory that copes with social complexity while, in a normatively cogent way, dealing with questions of social justice.

Žižek, I believe, comes closest to a formulation of the problem that might get beyond the impasse of Althusserian neo-functionalism without lapsing into what I continue to regard as the charmed circle of a hypostatisation of ideology. Althusser maintained that mutual recognition was the basic paradigm of ideological misrecognition and that this is best grasped through a theory of the institutional construction of social identity, which implies that: (1) ideology permeates all of the other structural instances of the social totality because it is relevant to the performance of tasks in economy and administration, as well as actions in civil society and the family; and (2), ideology considered from the functional perspective can be regarded as a series of institutional apparatuses that are responsible for the production of social subjectivity. Laclau and Mouffe made important strides forward in liberating the workings of ideology, so conceptualised, from the requirements of neo-functionalism, and in opening up the space for understanding the historical effectivity of ideological forms of subjectivity through an acknowledgement of historical contingency. But their theory, in coping with aspect (1) of ideology, mistakenly inflated ideological discourse into the social substance, thus negating the specificity of aspect (2) of ideology and rendering invisible the effectiveness of economy and politics. Žižek does not recognise this problem at all – if anything, he intensifies it – but he does understand that once relatively separated from functional requirements driving social reproduction, a concept of agency implies a notion of accountability, and he makes an argument for a deontological understanding of moral responsibility that could, through familiar dialectical moves that take us from Kant to Hegel, explain mutual recognition within this framework. Reading *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, *For They Know Not What They Do* and *Tarrying with the Negative* as the outline of a theory of ethical life, based on the standard Hegelian contours of the working up of the struggle for recognition through ascending forms of universality towards positive freedom, would mean lending the thesis of “mutual recognition as ideological misrecognition” some normative substance. Because this is already lodged within a theory that decouples ideology from seamless social reproduction, ethical life is not instrumentalised (although it is conditioned), and the claims for recognition of



ideologically-formed subjects involved in social conflict could be understood to have real normative force. At the same time, however, it would be necessary to relocate this theory of ideology within a conception of the social formation that would capture some of the things that Althusser was trying to describe about social complexity and functional relations, without the burden of his “Spinozist eternity” of social reproduction.

But this reading of Žižek, as supplying something akin to the Habermasian distinction between “system” and “lifeworld,” only becomes possible through a critical reconstruction of his complex position, and in closing let me again enter a plea for the dialectical methodology of *CCI*. Negation – shorn, perhaps, of unnecessary polemical inflection – is a crucial step in any theoretical reconstruction; premature synthetic gestures without sufficient consideration of the intellectual connections between positions can just lead to syncretic eclecticism. *The Charmed Circle of Ideology* is neither a rejection of Marxism, nor a dogmatic reassertion of Marxism. It is something entirely different: one of the only studies to engage in a sufficiently close analysis of the positions of Butler, Žižek, Laclau and Mouffe to place its refutation of the anti-universalist and anti-Enlightenment animus of these leading theorists, and their lazy hypostatisation of ideology under the sign of “discourse,” beyond question; but one that does so in a way that equally refuses the path of least resistance, which is to sweep these complex positions aside with a gesture of impatience and grasp for neo-Marxist positions without considering the merits of a reconstruction of the theory of ideology of this kind.