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Academia, Marxism, and Sociology: A Warning From "The History Man"

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Abstract

An essay by Tom Brass which examines how popular culture formed the negative image of sociology as taught at the 1960s new universities by portraying it as following Marxist fashion and thereby failing to anticipate the shift to the anti-Marxism of the cultural turn. It concludes by considering why and how such academic fashion is constructed and reproduced, and examines implications for the kinds of hegemonic trends encountered in social science publications.

Keywords

marxism, culture shift, History Man

Introduction: Publishing, Hierarchy, Power[1]

Academic publishing, and Marxist contributions to or exclusions from this, are possibly the most under-researched and undiscussed topics in the social sciences, which is ironic, given their centrality to the way in which intellectual discourse was conducted world-wide throughout the immediate the post-war era. The latter period, lasting for approximately the next three decades, saw the proliferation of academic journals, many of which were edited by Marxists, publishing much pathbreaking research and analysis on Marxism, in addition to debates generated and sustained as a result, is a matter of record. Perhaps the highpoint occurred during the 1960s, when the purpose of social science departments in new universities was twofold: to introduce, and then to undertake, the study and research into the dynamics of society, home and abroad.[2] This was a period, moreover, that coincided with the shift in Marxism, from a practice at the level of the street, to its study at the level of the university. This process was itself accompanied by the entry of Marxists into academic posts, now required to provide the teaching about such political theory.

Accordingly, it is impossible to understand how academic publishing has operated in the past, and continues to do so still, without reference to this wider political and institutional background. The latter helps explain which, why, and when certain political approaches thrive or decline, a dynamic that is itself reflected in the shifting intellectual fashions taken up or discarded by academic journals, their publishers, and their readership. Not the least important aspect of this history is a consideration of the full extent and virulence of the political reaction to student protest at the new universities during the late 1960s, the purported role of sociology in generating this, and how such issues were depicted in popular culture, thereby constructing an image both of the new university sector, and of its emphasis on the social sciences and Marxism, for the wider society.

The reason for invoking the fictional narrative of *The History Man*, together with its failure wholly to anticipate that a fundamental change was about to take place in the dominant political discourse, is simple. Without addressing the manner in which a paradigm is – or is not – reproduced within the institutional structure of the university system, and how this in an important sense both influences and is influenced by academic publishing in all its forms (journals, books, edited volumes), it is difficult to situate the way in which a specifically Marxist publishing project might fare. This is especially true of the way editorial power is exercised via journals and books.

This presentation consists of two parts, the first of which examines how popular culture formed the negative image of sociology as taught at the 1960s new universities by portraying

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[2] For a useful survey of the new universities during this era, together with their social science departmental background, see Pellew and Taylor (2021).

it as following Marxist fashion, thereby failing to anticipate the shift to the anti-Marxism of the cultural turn. The second part considers why such academic fashion is constructed and reproduced, together with its implications for the kinds of hegemonic trends encountered in social science publications.

I

The Bleak End of Things

Almost fifty years have passed since the publication of a campus novel *The History Man*, which is thought by some to have undermined – if not destroyed – the academic reputation and public image of sociology as learned in British university departments.[3] Written by Malcom Bradbury, who taught English Literature at the University of East Anglia, the novel went on to form the basis for a widely-acclaimed BBC television drama in 1981, solidifying in the public mind an association between what had hitherto been two distinct processes: teaching in the academic discipline of sociology; and a perception of the social sciences as licensing 'political indoctrination' by Marxism.[4] Tracing the negative effects of increased access to higher education, the narrative of *The History Man* portrayed the venal and self-serving pursuits of a radical leftist sociology lecturer – Howard Kirk – in a newly established university during the 1960s, in the course of which he advanced his own interests by exploiting in one way or another all those around him (students, colleagues, friends, family).[5] This is what happens, Bradbury appears to be saying, when anyone can become an undergraduate and a Marxist can end up teaching in a university.

As in so many areas in academia, the historical focus on the 1960s new universities is reductive, and tends to lionize particular individuals, thereby creating and then reproducing a cult of personality.[6] What happened at such institutions therefore becomes about what happened to one individual who is as a result cast in a heroic or anti-heroic role, not unlike

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[3] On the negative impact *The History Ma*n is said to have had on the reputation of sociology and sociologists, see Ian Christie, 'Return of Sociology', *Prospect Magazine*, 20th January, 1999. For his part, Bradbury (2006: 144-45) rejects this view, arguing that he perceives the discipline itself as positive.

[4] Whilst it is true that the view of sociology as a hotbed of Marxist theory came under attack from many other academics at this conjuncture – including Amis (1970: 157ff.), Cox and Dyson (1969-77), and Gould (1977) – it is nevertheless the case that the reach both of the novel and of the television version of *The History Man* was much wider in terms of audience and popular culture, as such being more responsible for the creation and reproduction of the negative public image, both of the discipline and of its institutional location.

[5] The context and effect of this increased access to university education is outlined elsewhere by Bradbury (2006: 54-55): 'In 1960s Britain the Robbins Report was published, recommending a fresh expansion of higher education. Six new universities were built, the teaching of new subjects encouraged, and [student] grants even improved. At the time all this was seen as yet another fundamental revolution, probably a dangerous step…In fact the new universities brought in much academic innovation, a variety of new subjects, syllabuses and teaching methods; but they still maintained the elite, selective, highly personal nature of British higher education. They also became smart and trendy places to be, competing with Oxbridge in the academic stakes. Around 1968 they also became rather radical places. The student revolutions that swept America and Europe found a special home in those pristine, architect-designed citadels…'

[6] What students desired politically, together with their views about the way new universities, teaching, and society in general ought to change, quickly narrowed down to opinion expressed by 'representative' individuals. In the case of Essex University, for example, it was David Triesman who became synonymous with its 'student voice', featuring in most accounts of the 1968 protests at that university written by outsiders (Cockburn and Blackburn, 1969: 141-59; Widgery, 1976: 422; Fraser, 1988: 31, 61-2, 67, 110, 111, 114, 245-48). He subsequently followed a somewhat familiar rightwards political trajectory. Now a businessman and member of the House of Lords, Baron Triesman held political office in the 'New Labour' government of Tony Blair, and later resigned from the Labour Party radicalised under the Corbyn leadership.

the protagonist in *The History Man*. In the UK the new universities were set up in what now seems a comparatively benign post-war era, one informed by an expansion of higher education funded by state expenditure. The twofold object was on the one hand to provide the accumulation process with the requisite skilled labour-power it was thought to lack, and on the other with intellectuals whose 'problem-solving' knowledge would itself contribute to a more efficient capitalist production. Key to these objectives was the role of the social sciences generally, together with a focus on investigating the reasons for the economic backwardness of Third World nations.

Unmentioned by Bradbury, however, are two crucial and interrelated political issues. First, that students were not unthinkingly led by the nose, as in the way *The History Man* depicts the influence exercised by its main protagonist. Rather than following blithely what they were taught, therefore, the main target of the 1968 student movement was the conservative nature of the sociological theory then on offer. And second, the fact that many of those appointed to the academic posts in the new universities were at that conjuncture themselves products of the old ones, and brought with them the ideas, values, and politics of these ancient educational institutions.[7] One effect of this dissonance was a certain element of disdain towards student politics in general, and Marxism in particular, the inference being that it was presumptuous to attempt changing the educational system, let alone society.[8] It was in part against this kind of view, together with the far from politically radical sociology interpretations taught by such academics now lecturing at the new universities, that student protest was aimed.[9] Even when not employed in these new (= upstart) institutions, Oxbridge academics continued to influence what was – and what was not – taught, an exercise of power underlined by the Berlin/Deutscher episode.[10]

Despite not being a product of Oxbridge, Bradbury nevertheless subscribed to the kinds of traditional values such ancient university education represented.[11] Described by a close friend and fellow novelist as 'a liberal Tory' who not only enjoyed the 'pastoral life' but also

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[7] A product of Oxford, one such academic taught sociology at Essex before departing for a post at Cambridge, where his conservative political views surfaced in an episode recounted elsewhere (Brass, 2017: 65-67).

[8] The flavour of this contempt can be gauged from what was contained in the *Manifesto of Rationalism*, produced for a Revolutionary Festival that took place at Essex University in the 1969 Spring Term. Rumoured to have been composed by some members of the academic staff, its text included the following sentiments: 'My tone will be arrogant, but the arrogant were made so by the ignorant... To every single student...you are the vanguard of the vanguard of the vanguard. Raise on high YOUR banners emblazoned with the glorious legends of battles lost & prepare to lose again...Why do you bother?...March with Marx: the British Museum is with us; who can be against us?...Sociologist power, workers control (that is Control of the Workers by Commitees of properly qualified experts who will UNDERSTAND.)...students, and those who have been students, will be the first to be destroyed in "the revolution" [and] this is the main reason why they should seek to bring it about.'

[9] On this point, see Cohn-Bendit & Cohn-Bendit (1968: 147, 168).

[10] In what became one of the most notorious episodes of political discrimination, Isaiah Berlin, an Oxford academic, blocked the candidacy for a Chair at Sussex University of Isaac Deutscher, a revolutionary Marxist, and then proceeded to lie to everyone about his role in this decision.

[11] Such values are prefigured in earlier writings by Bradbury. In a wide-ranging critique of 1950s affluence and modernity, he (Bradbury, 1962: 111, original emphasis) promotes and defends the idea of a return to the past, a view consistent with that expressed subsequently in *The History Man*: 'The person who lives in the country stands at least a chance of finding the traditional society's values at work, the old community sense…and even if he does not, he can at least learn to cultivate his own garden, in order to be ready when society does grind to a stop. It will be protested by the doctrinaire that such a person is living in the past, and sentimentalizing it. In the traditional society, however, there is no need to live in the past, since it is essentially the same as the present; it is only in a consumer society that one *can* sentimentalize the past, since it is different. Further, living in the past is better than living nowhere at all. In short, to choose, as a present-day man, to live in the past is to make a choice of thoroughly modern significance…'

distrusted 'modernity and the revolutionary desire for change', Bradbury espoused views consistent with the agrarian myth: supportive of the rural, the small-scale, and tradition, while opposed to the urban and modernity.[12] Unsurprisingly, therefore, these views permeate *The History Man* narrative.[13] In the book another lecturer, the political antithesis of the revolutionary leftist sociologist, is described by Bradbury as 'rural and bourgeois' who liked 'paddocks and stables', whilst prior to the expansion of the new university, 'this stretch of land was a peaceful, pastoral Eden, a place of fields and cows [where] the very first students, pleasant, likeable…of quite another kind from the present generation…'.[14] The new university, by contrast, is depicted negatively, as antagonistic to the pastoral: 'all plate glass and high rise…the campus is massive, one of those dominant modern environments…that modern man creates', an urban context in which 'the peacocks have gone; the students are not bright originals in the old style…' and '*Gemeinschaft* yielded to *Gesellschaft*; community was replaced by the fleeting, passing contacts of city life'.[15]

Not the least of the many ironies is that, shortly after the publication of *The History Man*, intellectual and political hegemony in academia passed swiftly from leftism to that of the anti-Marxist cultural turn.[16] In part, this shift can be linked to the requirement for the skilled labour that students at the new universities would provide coincided with the beginning of deskilling, a result being that many of those who entered the job market with degrees thought to confer better employment prospects found that they were over-qualified. To some degree, it contributed to the subsequent dampening effect on radical leftist politics, a process that stemmed from an increased academic labour market competition and its attendant pressure to

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[12] On this see David Lodge, who in the 'Afterword' (Bradbury, 2006: 418) observes that '[i]n later life he enjoyed the occasional sojourn as a visiting fellow at Oxford [and he] always seemed very happy and at home in these settings – the smooth lawns, gravelled paths and ancient buildings soothed his spirit, and the ritual of hall and high table appealed to him', adding that 'Malcom was at heart a kind of liberal Tory…valuing tradition and pastoral life, tolerance and civility, distrusting modernity and the revolutionary desire for change.'

[13] 'The book had had a difficult gestation', accepts Bradbury (1987: 304), 'had come from an uneasy and pessimistic change in my own values…as my initial excitement about the liberationist spirit of the 1960s moved toward a darkened unease.'

[14] See Bradbury (1975: 39, 63-64), who elsewhere displays a similar kind of antipathy towards leftism which merely underlines the extent and significance of his political antagonism. Just as the target of his narrative in *The History Man* is a Marxist sociologist, so in his other fiction the object both of his satire and his censure are socialist governments of Eastern Europe (Bradbury, 1983, 1986). Hence the fictional Slaka (Bradbury, 1983: 49, 57) is 'the capital of a hardline country of the socialist bloc', a 'proletarian country' where nothing works properly. About its deficiencies all the usual topes abound (Bradbury, 1983: 35, 38, 96): the awfulness of socialist regimentation ('evidently this is a culture where people are used to waiting'); the risible nature of attempts to account for economic inefficiencies; the uncomprehending yet rigid adherence of its population to state rules and instruction; a place where armed soldiers are everywhere, 'young men, with primal-looking unstated features'; and a worthless paper currency depicts 'muscular men wielding sledge-hammers and yet more muscular women tending vast machines'. In the words of a visiting academic (Bradbury, 1983: 37), '[t]here are colleagues of his at home who would regard [the people's republic of Slaka] as the model of the desirable future, the outcome to which a benevolent history points; there are others who would see it as the bleak end of things'. Unsurprisingly, it is to the latter category that Bradbury himself belongs.

[15] Bradbury (1975: 64-65). Praising the novel and underlining its literary importance, Burgess (1984: 111) is surely wrong to commend its 'total objectivity'. Notwithstanding his view that '[i]t is a disturbing and accurate picture of campus life in the late sixties and early seventies', therefore, questionable is the conclusion that '[i]ts great aesthetic virtue…is its total objectivity'.

[16] Looking back on the political change that occurred shortly after the publication of *The History Man*, Bradbury (2006: 109) notes: 'The truly amazing thing is how in the last ten years, since Marxism collapsed and the Berlin Wall came down, the ideological divide by which a whole generation found intellectual seriousness has quite disappeared…Now there is only one ideology [which] means none. We live in postmodern times. Ideas aren't beliefs but commodities. History's a theme park. Thought is irony. Liberal individualism turns out not to be a great humanist belief but pure capitalism, crass commerce, after all.'

conform (= not rock the boat). It was this very same intake of students, radicalized politically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, that went on to provide the next generation of university lecturers, composed for the most part of leftists who, as soon as Marxism ceased to be fashionable, quickly and/or quietly abandoned it in favour of postmodernism.[17]

Who is *The History Man* Now?

From the 1980s onwards, therefore, the dominant paradigm in the social sciences and the humanities more generally shifted dramatically; away from the materialist approach of Marxism, deemed inappropriate for an understanding of processes, issues, and populations outside Europe, and towards the 'new' populist postmodernism, the focus of which was on the empowering nature of identity politics. The latter approach was – and is – strongly antagonistic towards Marxist political economy, dismissed by postmodernists along with its conceptual apparatus of socialism/materialism/class as just one more kind of Eurocentric/Enlightenment 'foundationalism'.[18] Marxism was deemed to have nothing to say, either about the Third World or about issues in the metropolitan capitalist nations of the West.

Postmodern hostility expressed towards all things Marxist involves a twofold process: a denial of its historiography and conceptual apparatus is accompanied by an insistence on their replacement – epistemologically and politically – by a populist approach together with its privileging of peasant, ethnic, gender, and national 'otherness'. Marxism is declared irredeemably Eurocentric, tainted by a historical deprivileging of these same non-class identities that in the opinion of many postmodernists amounts to racism/sexism. It is this essentialist academic discourse, in effect recuperating and proclaiming as empowering all the categories and identities criticized hitherto by Marxist political economy, that it is argued here corresponds to the emergence of a very different History Man (and Woman), displaying all the negative characteristics attributed earlier by Bradbury to the main protagonist – a revolutionary leftist sociology lecturer – in his novel.

In one sense, what has happened in the years since the publication of *The History Man* in 1975 is the reverse of the process depicted by Bradbury. In his novel, a scheming and venal sociology lecturer who is revolutionary leftist carries all before him, and in a political dispute with the university authorities emerges triumphant, continuing in post and enjoying the political support of his students. Rather than the triumphalist consolidation of Marxism, those who adhered to the latter politics experienced something akin to a purge. The reality, therefore, was somewhat different. Leftists who sought or obtained university posts were faced with one of two options: either to water down or discard Marxism in order to gain a university job and then rise up academic hierarchy; or, sticking to principle by refusing to abandon Marxism, were denied access to or ejected from such employment.

Many went along with the first option, and in academic terms prospered accordingly, while those who followed the second path were denied the promotion merited by their scholarly achievements, remained on the margins of academia, or outside it altogether. The latter category included not just Isaac Deutscher but also others like George Rudé, E.H.Carr, Maurice Dobb, David Abraham, Jack Stauder, and E.P. Thompson. Unlike the protagonist of *The History Man* who, as a revolutionary leftist, successfully retained his academic post,

[17] On this point, see Brass (2017: Chapter 18).
[18] See, for example, the subaltern studies project associated with the work of Guha (1982-89).

therefore, those with a similar politics were in some instances prevented from getting permanent university jobs, from promotion once in them, or ejected from such employment as they already had.

In another sense, however, Bradbury rightly depicted two of the central dynamics at play during that era. The first of these was opportunism: what his main character, the radical leftist, pursues is personal advantage, disguised as revolutionary spirit.[19] The manner in which such opportunism is presented may indeed be exaggerated, but – unfortunately – it is all too true as a description of what happened when some leftists became tenured academics during that era. Hence the public stance that as university lecturers they would change the world for the better in some instances hid a desire merely to ascend the academic ladder, even to the apex of the university hierarchy.

The second dynamic rightly criticized by Bradbury was that of politics merely as academic fashion, a pervasive theme that surfaces throughout the novel.[20] Ironically, the 'Marxism' of the radical leftist sociologist as depicted in *The History Man* has little or nothing to do with Marxist theory and practice, being instead a case of 'do your own thing'. Rather than based on objective and rigorous theoretical analysis of issues in line with Marxist political economy, therefore, students are encouraged simply to follow a subjectivist/instinctual path ('your own desires').[21] The picture that emerges is one of dilettantism: of 'Marxist'-academic-as-fake, of a revolutionary stance as essentially a fashion accessory, of learning as nothing more than 'a little Marx, a little Freud, and a little social history'.[22]

That such an insubstantial approach is regarded by Bradbury as little short of dilettantism, and thus profoundly unintellectual, is clear. Despite coming to the new university 'with a reputation ahead of him…for popularizing innovation', therefore, the novel's protagonist 'had not done a great deal of research on the book, and it was weak on fact and documentation.'[23] This element of dilettantism is itself reinforced by equating the attendance by the same revolutionary leftist at parties given by publishers in Bloomsbury, by socialists in Hampstead,

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[19] The issue of opportunism is also central to an earlier campus novel (McCarthy, 1953), set in the United States during the 1950s anti-communist investigations conducted by HUAC. Its main character pretends he is a communist so that liberals in the same university department are unable to sack him from his academic post without compromising their principles. Like the protagonist of *The History Man*, he not only behaves oppressively towards his students, but is described (McCarthy, 1953: 262) as an opportunist 'with a talent for self-dramatisation [and] one of those birds that are more communist than the communists in theory, but you'll never see them on the picket line'.

[20] Hence the following kinds of accusation levelled at the main character (Bradbury, 1975: 16, 32, 40): 'You've lived off the flavours and fashions of the mind', 'you've substituted trends for morals and commitments', and 'I'm not wild about all this violent radical zeal that's about now…[t]hey taste of a fashion'. From the outset he is described by Bradbury (1975: 3) as the epitome of the fashionable revolutionary leftist academic, 'a sociologist, a radical sociologist…of whom you are likely to have heard, for he is much heard of [since] the university, having aspirations to relevance, has made much of sociology; and it would be hard to find anyone in the field with a greater sense of relevance than [him]. His course on Revolutions is a famous keystone…' Towards the end of the novel (Bradbury, 1975: 228) he is labelled 'a radical's radical'.

[21] When asked by a student for advice (Bradbury, 1975: 83-84), the leftist academic answers 'there's only one rule. Follow the line of your own desires'.

[22] The theme of academic-as-fake is linked by Bradbury (1975: 69, 73) to the acceptance by the revolutionary leftist sociologist that all that was required intellectually was that 'you need to know a little Marx, a little Freud, and a little social history', a refrain that pops up a regular intervals, both throughout the narrative (Bradbury, 1975: 22, 26, 30, 119) and elsewhere (Bradbury, 2006: 143-44).

[23] Bradbury (1975: 37).

and those given by new boutiques in the King's Road.[24] Underlined thereby is the central role of fashion, in ideas and politics no less than in clothes. Vogue in the case of the latter – cheaply made, all show, no substance, easily and quickly discarded – is a metaphor for the former being as much of a fad with similar kinds of characteristics.

II

The Power of Hierarchy

An effect of such a negative portrayal of the main character who, as well as being a Marxist and a sociologist, is also a venal and exploitative individual, is to condemn both Marxism and social science as innately hazardous – morally, politically, intellectually, ideologically – leading inevitably to the kind of behaviour exhibited by the protagonist of *The History Man*. It is a conflation that manages to produce or reinforce the impression that following fashion, opportunism, and lack of scruples are all outcomes simply of being a Marxist sociologist lecturer – and in the narrative are associated by Bradbury only with Marxism and sociology – whereas palpably this is not so. Moreover, it delinks such negative attributes from another and more important cause: the competitive nature of the university as an institution operating within an increasingly neoliberal capitalist system, and the power exercised by those holding senior positions in the academic hierarchy.

Significantly, therefore, following academic fashion in the manner outlined by Bradbury in *The History Man* still persists, but now in a different way. Then – in the 1960s – it was about class, based on Marxism, whereas half a century later it is currently about privileging non-class identity. Class, together with Marxism, has not only long ceased to be fashionable, but become profoundly unfashionable among university departments and staff. Where academic publishing is concerned, fashion takes a specific form: jumping on the bandwagon when an argument, concept, or framework emerges. This is accompanied by an additional process: if the new interpretation happens to be formulated by Marxism, this is adapted by discarding its revolutionary agenda so that it fits in with bourgeois political ideology.

Following fashion, simply because it is fashion, usually entails accepting ideas, concepts or frameworks at their face value, invariably without interrogating their claims and origins. This practice can be seen at work in almost any social science journal, and especially those focussing on development studies. Not the least important aspect of following academic fashion is that it obviates the need for research into – and thus the questioning of – the claims advanced by a prevailing orthodoxy. Hence it permits the reproduction of an epistemological shortcut, to the effect that as a theory, an argument, a concept justifies the approach taken, there is little or nothing more needs to be said on this issue. There are many other reasons why this practice flourishes, not least the cult of the 'celebrity' academic and the deleterious impact on debate of academic seniority together with its kind of institutional power.[25]

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[24] See Bradbury (1975: 52), who writes later (Bradbury, 1987: 307) that 'I wanted to display in Howard Kirk the modern man of plots, something of a radical opportunist, living somewhere between the world of radical belief and that of fashion…'.

[25] In what was an accurate prognosis, the editorial to the first issue of of a new leftist journal noted in 1987 that '[t]he New Realists of today have monopolised the media with the idea that there is no hope of a genuine socialist alternative. Only massive compromise and endless exercises in vote-catching are possible in the current political and economic situation, they claim…There is a danger of slipping into an alternative "star" system of Left celebrities, whose word becomes dogma; where debate turns into a monologue by the chosen few'. See '*Interlink* – a new magazine for the left', *Interlink*, No. 1, January/February 1987, pp. 2-3. This is exactly what

Like so much else, it is impossible to examine why, in the case of journal publication, some kinds of approach are deemed acceptable while others are not, without reference to the power exercised within and beyond academic hierarchy. Bluntly put, how often will an untenured junior lecturer go out on a limb by criticizing the approach of a senior and powerful member either of the same department, institution, discipline, or even of the journal to which an article has been submitted? To this question the only honest answer is almost never. Evidence of this is hard to miss, particularly when one examines the bibliographies of journal articles. The latter frequently contain what might be termed reputation stroking by junior academics of their seniors, frequently misattributing to the latter the intellectual or theoretical advances in fact made by others.

Another reason concerns a paradoxical effect of unexamined adherence to the dominant paradigm, which at a particular conjuncture enjoys the intellectual and political status of a 'given'.[26] Again ironically, this in turn can give rise to yet another kind fashionability, whereby a dissenting interpretation, once it gains ground imperceptibly, generates not just a plethora of mind changing revision on the part of others, but also spurious claims to have adhered to the dissenting view all along, or even to have formulated it in the first place. This academic phenomenon, too, can be seen at work in journal and book publication, in the form of attempted procrustean reformulation of past error so as to claim to always having been in step with what has now become a new orthodoxy. Instances of this kind of *volte face* are difficult to keep hidden from anyone carrying out even very basic research; that it does not often surface is, once again, down to the power exercised via academic hierarchy, where pointing out in a journal article or a book review the inconsistencies/contradictions in arguments/claims made over time by a senior and institutionally powerful academic carries obvious career implications.

No One is Listening?

Of related importance is a familiar trope within academic circles: that no publishing activity generates so much hostility as reviewing a book critically. Grievances fuelled by less than effusive comments are legendary, and their effects can be long lasting. Inescapably, therefore, this applies with particular force to the kind of reviews that are not the sort which appear as quotations on the back cover of any subsequent editions of the tome in question.[27] The significance of this observation is that the impact on its writer of a damaging review is easy to underestimate, since where the offended author is a senior academic, the hostility is subject

happened, with some leftist journals vying for attention by diluting or abandoning core Marxist theory and/or practice, in the course of privileging the views of 'celebrity' contributors.

[26] An illustration is the primacy allocated by the 'new' populist postmodernism to non-class identities (ethnicity, nationality) as progressive forms of empowerment, and as such the suitable – and indeed only – basis for political mobilization. To dissent from this approach, by pointing out its affinity with the ideology of the far right in the 1930s Europe, risks intellectual if not academic disbarment, and certainly enormous difficulties in securing the publication of such a view.

[27] Based on an erroneous chronology, sometime ago a colleague accused me of leaving a trail of academic reputations unfairly wrecked due to my reviews and critiques, an inaccurate charge in that it overlooks the trajectory involved. With a few exceptions, such criticism has itself been a *response* to a previous and equally critical analysis, and thus not a unilateral and unprovoked attack initiated by me. Defending one's views in this manner has always been central to debate over different interpretations about development theory and political economy, and cannot therefore be castigated plausibly as in some sense inappropriate.

to a multiplier effect: in addition to the wrath of the author him/herself, therefore, all his/her friends, colleagues and/or clients are expected to show a similar level of upset.[28]

About this it is possible to draw upon personal experience. The recent publication by me of a review article pointing out the errors and misinterpretations contained in an edited volume purporting to address what it termed critical agrarian studies, showing in particular how it had replaced a hitherto dominant Marxist paradigm with a populist one, elicited a symptomatic yet instructive response**.**[29] The reaction was somewhat predictable, taking the form of a communication from one of those whose contribution had been found wanting, to the effect that where my criticisms were concerned nobody in the development studies community was listening. The inference was clear: not that the criticisms themselves were wrong (they weren't) but simply – and egregiously – that they should not have been made.

Amongst other things, this kind of reaction demonstrates the inaccuracy of the self-serving myth that academia encourages – and, indeed, is based upon – critical endeavour in pursuit of knowledge. Apart from being incorrect, it reveals what is a common response to the publication of Marxist criticism: rather than engage with this, it is regarded as non-existent. In short, an erasure from the debate akin to an academic version of *damnatio memoriae*. It is hardly necessary to point out that an objection of this sort to a forensic theoretical and methodological engagement with a position amounts in effect to the forbidding of politics (= no criticism allowed). Contrary to what was claimed by this particular contributor, however, evidence suggests that in some cases those writing about development were – and are – indeed listening.[30]

This kind of response has perhaps become more pervasive, given the current need to establish an individual space within what is an increasingly competitive academic market. Recognition that is conferred by being acknowledged as either having established an new approach within an existing discipline, developing a ground-breaking and original interpretation about an important issue, or alternatively reinterpreting the meaning of what has long been accepted as

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[28] As has been outlined elsewhere (Brass, 2017: 62-67), it was a critical review by Isaac Deutscher of a book written by Isaiah Berlin that resulted in the latter blocking the university employment prospects of the former. This extended from the candidacy of Deutscher for an academic post, to his participation in conferences, which confirms the operation of a process long known about but not often publicly acknowledged: namely, that one of the main drivers of social science discourse, and a major contributor to its political conservatism, is the power exercised by senior academics via their networks, pre-empting challenges to the status quo by subordinates for whom a display of too much heterodoxy might threaten career or promotion chances.

[29] The edited volume in question is by Akram-Lodhi, Dietz, Engels, and McKay (2021), reviewed critically by Brass (2023).

[30] In this connection, one notes merely that some analyses criticized by me have reappeared subsequently in a 'readjusted' version, in effect taking account of the comments made. For example, the shift from an initial denial of feudalism and the categorization of unfree labour as 'so-called' (= non-existent) to the acceptance both of this mode and of unfree production relations. An analogous change in another case entailed the reclassification of unfree labour-power: from a production relation deemed incompatible with capitalism to its preferred form. Declaring Marxism wrong for not recognizing the acceptability to capital of unfree labour, and having been criticized for this, yet another case followed the same procedure, adopting the viewpoint of 'a more faithful Marxist tradition' – the very same view dismissed earlier. By contrast, another eliminated his endorsements of a prominent subaltern studies contributor, also after the latter had been strongly criticized, whereas someone else – having initially declared the industrial reserve army an irrelevant concept when applied to India, and equally been criticized for this – did the opposite, and has now made the same concept the centrepiece of the causes of poverty in India. Details about all these unacknowledged shifts, extending from critiques of the original argument to the appearance of the 'readjusted' version, are set out elsewhere (Brass, 2018: chapters 4 and 7; Brass, 2021: chapters 3, 5, and 6; Brass, 2022: chapters 3 and 4).

fact, has – as Hobsbawm once remarked – 'considerable compensations'.[31] Periodic disputes, by no means confined to the social sciences and humanities, about the origin of a particular idea or interpretation underline the importance of this issue, albeit one that – although tacitly conceded within academia – rarely surfaces in the public domain.[32] Should anyone be foolhardy enough to point out the error of such narratives – that claims about views held are incorrect, that intellectual discoveries are misattributed, and that the history/theory of development as presented is other than described – the reaction is akin to *lèse-majesté*.

Conclusion

Over a whole range of issues – among them the persistence and causes of economic crisis, the the pattern of changes in the capitalist labour regime, the deleterious political and ideological impact of an industrial reserve army that is global, the continuing importance of class, the political dangers of empowering non-class identities – the theoretical approach of Marxism has been proved right, time and again. Where academic publishing is concerned, this has generated contradictory responses. On the one hand, therefore, Marxism has been dismissed as outdated and irrelevant, as such having nothing to contribute either politically or economically to the analysis of present-day capitalism and the kinds of problems generated as a result. On the other, however, when a Marxist approach is shown to be right, the response of those who earlier cast doubt on its efficacy has in some instances been surreptitiously to adopt its argument and findings, without acknowledging this U-turn, hoping that this volte face would escape notice, or if it was would not dare to point this out. It is this latter option which corresponds to the kind of academic bandwaggon jumping satirized so effectively in *The History Man*.

Part of the difficulty in such cases stems from an earlier cause: during the 1960s the entry into academic posts of Marxists, and consequently Marxism as a topic of study. Mimicking the logic of capitalism, the process of competition/recognition within the university licensed what quickly became a plethora of reinterpretation. The latter entailed adding to what passed for Marxism concepts and theory that were non- or even anti-Marxist, leading inevitably to its dilution and depoliticization. Rather than the disempowerment of class, and its political resolution in the form of a transition to a revolutionary socialism, therefore, the desirable objective quickly shifted to the empowerment or re-empowerment of non-class identities, to be achieved without necessarily transcending the capitalist system itself.

All this poses difficulties for those who remain Marxists, in that they are tasked with interrogating not just the claims advanced by academic orthodoxy, but also by the holders of such views, an experience that understandably generates two sorts of discomfort. That felt by many senior academics when an attempt is made to examine how their political views have changed over time, the same being true of attempts to question the political credentials of purportedly leftist publications. Hence the institutionally disruptive practice and thus the unpopularity of the critical approach to existing theory undertaken by revolutionary Marxists. When the latter – unlike the character portrayed in *The History Man* – insist on interrogating claims advanced by exponents of anti-Marxist and/or bourgeois social science theory, they initially attract what is unmistakeably a torrent of opprobrium. In cases where such Marxist

[31] For this view expressed by Hobsbawm, see Evans (2019: 482).
[32] How important this kind of recognition can be is clear from the fact that the dispute in the 1980s between American and French researchers over who first discovered the virus that caused AIDs was resolved only by intervention at Presidential and Prime Ministerial level (Reagan, Chirac).

criticism is irrefutable, and can be seen as such, it is quickly and erroneously declared to be either commonplace or unconnected with the wider approach of Marxist theory. In the latter instance, the criticism is in effect deradicalized.

As with every other area subordinated to the rule of capital, academia is not immune to the power it exerts. Perhaps the most subverting influence is competition, a dynamic that drives both opportunism and fashion. As *The History Man* narrative makes clear, at stake is not just employment prospects but also research funding, book publication, and peer group recognition. Hence the need to keep up with, and certainly not depart from, the prevailing orthodoxy fuels a development that mimics the end result of the accumulation process: the establishment and reproduction within the domain of academic discourse in the social sciences of a trend akin to intellectual monopoly. Unsurprisingly, therefore, a consequence is that a specific interpretation becomes hegemonic: as such it ceases to be interrogated, any attempt to do so inviting obloquy (‘no one is listening’). This, it is argued here, has largely been the fate of Marxism during the epoch of the ‘cultural turn’, when the latter orthodoxy in the shape of the ‘new’ populist postmodernism assumed and exercised dominance over most forms of academic activity, not least employment, research, and publication.

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