THEORY AND THE LEFT

In my introduction to *The Dialectical Imagination* by Martin Jay , I concluded with this: “I am reading this book because I firmly believe that the left requires a theory as well as a political practice.” After several days a commenter questioned my certainty. I think his comments raise important points about my long-term project, and so rather than continue the conversation on an old post, I am hoisting the comments so far into this post, edited for punctuation, spelling and readability. Also, I shortened mine. My thanks to Hubert Horan for raising this issue.

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Hubert Horan says:
June 12, 2017 at 6:00 pm
Why do you firmly believe that the left requires a theory as well as a political practice? You and other individuals might personally benefit from deeper analysis of theory and history, but I see no reason to belief that much broader groups (especially groups as broad as “the left”) could ever establish coherent theories that would make their politics stronger and more effective.

1950s conservatives felt hopelessly outnumbered by the “liberal” consensus of the day, and put in massive effort to create an “intellectual”/theoretical grounding for the movement. (Nash’s history of the conservative intellectual movement is a good starting point but there are many others) All of the various efforts were logically incoherent, as the effort to produce some kind of pure theory were always polluted by emotional/tribal biases (upper class elitism, love of hierarchy and status, poorly disguised racism, misogyny, etc).

Where in history has there ever been “rigorous intellectual political theory” that didn’t end up as an attempt to build a quasi-religious utopian ideological faith? Remember the huge role of ex-Leninists/Trotskyites or devout

Catholics and Evangelicals in the development of movement conservatism. The real challenge they faced (as leftists do now) is purely political, which by definition means combining the interests of a lot of groups whose worldviews could never be coherently reconciled. With the conservatives—in the 50s as well as today—this meant putting libertarians, hard social conservatives, laissez-faire capitalists, uncompromising militarists (anti-communists then, anti-Muslim today) and a few other groups under the same tent.

Conservatism grew when people with political skill and charisma (Buckley, Reagan) were able to finesse the differences between groups, and the increasing potential for political power got people to forget about theory and principles and focus on gaining more power. Despite all the effort and pretense, none of the successes of movement conservatism have anything to do with the theories put forth in past decades.

20th Century "liberalism" (from progressives through New Deal/New Frontier through 60s civil rights/antiwar through the collapse in the 70s) was never driven by widely known intellectual "theories" —it was always politically focused. Minor groups like 1930s communists excepted, it was never utopian or quasi-religious and battles were over political turf and tactics, not over ideological purity. There was plenty of searching for ideas about how to solve key problems or reach broader audiences, but very few wasted time searching for the One Great Unifying theory that the masses would line up to support. As with the conservatives, emotional biases (elitism, virtue signaling, desire to protect narrow economic interest, etc) caused lots of problems, but this wasn't going to be solved with more rigorous theory development.

I find some of these theoretical/historical issues fascinating, and best of luck with your research. I could imagine it might help establish a small faction within "the left" but I can't see how it could have a powerful impact

on “the left” as a whole.

Ed Walker says:
June 12, 2017 at 7:36 pm

This is a great comment. I generally agree with your history, but not necessarily with your view of theory. You neglect the role of neoliberal theory in the rise of conservatism. I’ve gone over a lot of this in other posts, many of which are centered on Foucault and Mirowski, here and earlier at the late lamented FireDogLake. There is a nice history in David Harvey’s A Brief History of Neoliberalism.
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Again, your comment is an important reminder that theory is not decisive. And believe me, I have not the slightest hope that what I write has a chance of effecting change by itself. Ideas, unlike wealth, do trickle out into the world, though, and therein lies my hope.

Hubert Horan says:
June 12, 2017 at 10:12 pm

No disagreement with any of your points about neoliberalism. The next historian of postwar conservatism after Nash I would have mentioned would have been Mirowski.

The difference, perhaps semantic, is that I don’t think anything supporting modern neoliberalism rises to the stature of “theory.” My guess is that the major conservative theorists of the 50s and 60s (Burnham, Kirk, Chambers, Rusher, Meyer, et. al) would have recognized modern neoliberal advocacy for what it is—faux-analysis to feed the propaganda needs of wealthy plutocrats. They certainly would have recognized that it was not “conservative” or theoretically rigorous.

Yes, there was a transitional period where some legitimate intellectuals (Friedman, Hayek) laid important groundwork for what later mutated into neoliberalism. Little of Friedman’s serious academic analysis served the neoliberal agenda, but most of his popular tracks did. Conservative

“theorizing” had major impacts only after they abandoned the model of independent academic analysis for a propaganda model serving the political objectives of their paymasters.

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That’s the discussion so far. The point about whether neoliberalism is a theory requires a response. Philip Mirowski might agree to some extent with Horan’s point. But I don’t. I think neoliberals accept at least the following ideas as foundational to their project.

1. Freedom means economic freedom.
2. Private property must be protected at the expense of every other interest.
3. The only valid way to allocate resources is through markets.
4. There are absolute truths. The first three points are examples of absolute truths.

Each of these four is subject to being interpreted in two ways, one way for the funders and one way for the rubes. Neoliberals tout economic freedom in health insurance, arguing that people should be allowed to buy insurance against specific diseases, or not, or specific limits on coverage or not. What that means is that poor people can buy whatever they can afford, whether or not it has value. In general, you are free to buy whatever you can afford, and that’s their definition of freedom. Meanwhile rich people can buy full protection from the costs of health care, because that’s freedom.

We see this form of argument all the time. Here’s Megan McArdle explaining why not installing sprinklers in public high-rise buildings is a plausible money-saving idea, and argues that markets should make safety decisions. Here’s Matt Yglesias explaining why Bangladesh might not even bother with building safety. In both cases, the only issue of interest is economic freedom.

On the idea of absolute truth, at one level, this sounds like an endorsement of fundamentalist Christianity. At another, we need

to know who decides what that absolute truth is. The rich might let fundamentalist preachers decree dogma, because ti doesn’t bother them or their kids and it sedates people. But when it comes to economic matters, including much foreign policy, we can be sure they ignore all that Christian stuff about the Sermon on the Mount and the story of the Loaves and the Fishes, and all that redistribution stuff.

Modern philosophy raises serious problems with the idea of absolute truth, valid for all times and in all places. Critical Theory also rejects the idea of absolute truth, and with it the idea that social problems can be solved permanently. We’ll see how that works out as we go forward in this book.