

Soviet Marxism and Analytical Philosophies of History by Eero Loone. London: Verso, 1992; 280 pages

If there is only one book which reflects the contradictions at the intersection between Marxist theory and the Soviet intellectual elite, this may well be it. Initially written during Brezhnev's 1970s as an orthodox textbook on the philosophy of history, it was later amended during the reformist 1980s and then given a final dusting down prior to publication in English in 1992. One's first impression is dominated by the effort the author has made to familiarise himself with western debates, to exude this familiarity and to position his narrative in their context. This comes as a pleasant surprise but also as a reminder that Brezhnev's USSR (or, more precisely, the Brezhnev intelligentsia) was not as hermetically isolated from the outside world as many instinctively assume today.

There are four parts to this book. *Part I defines the scope of a philosophy of history.* Is it meant as a mere study of logical problems or does it have an ontological function? The difference between the analytical school and the Marxist conception of a scientific cognition of history is thus clarified. Passages on the inherent tendency of bourgeois philosophy to break with ontology and on the possibility of extracting truths out of false systems, are particularly useful in today's intellectual environment and the recent 'linguistic turn' of western philosophers.

Part II describes the structure of historical knowledge. After a brief flirtation with Collingwood, Bernheim and Kuhn, Loone spells out his view that historical work requires two successive steps: (a) the historiography of the past which seeks to obtain knowledge and to intersect with social science (without being science), and (b) posing the question: What to do after one has established and interpreted the facts? He recommends a theoretically plural intersection of several forms of thought but warns that, even though these endeavours cannot be ideology-free, a blend of science with ideology does not necessarily lead to profound knowledge. Part II also features a thoughtful treatment of the problem of relativism (eg. 19th century historicism) and evaluates the reluctance to judge past generations and social structures in historical materialist terms. For instance, the French bourgeoisie who, unlike their German counterparts, had not evolved from the feudal aristocracy, were quite happy to admonish the feudal rulers of the past. Therefore French 19th century intellectuals were happily judging the past while the Germans leant towards historicism. Loone acknowledges the difficulty in seeing the past through the lenses of the present and dialectically resolves this problem by insisting that "while learning to be at home in the past, the historian has to remain a person of his own time".

Part III deals with the acquisition of historical knowledge. Even though it addresses the essential problem of how to approach the past, it is the least likeable of the four parts. The persevering reader will be rewarded with familiar insights on the historical information which word-concepts (eg. feudalism) can convey, on what constitutes an historical law (that is, laws being more than a mere recording of regularities), on what is a 'model' and on the (long term) unsustainability of ideological illusions as theories of society. Finally, *Part IV explains the Marxist theory of socio-economic formations.* It is by far

the most interesting part of the book. It acts as a good introduction to Marx's view of historical change and strives to make it more flexible, to rid it of its linear determinism. We find some refreshing discussions about the reversibility of historical processes, the possibility of the co-existence of different modes of production in one social formation, the distinction between endogenous societal change and change brought about by conquest. Occasionally the narrative becomes pretentious, adorned with unnecessary odd-looking diagrams. Nonetheless there is a lot here for those who want to read a careful exposition of the Marxist perspective on how societies evolve.

This is an uneven book in serious need of a good editor. Flashes of brilliance are spoiled by frequent excursions into tedium: "As regards a term, we can speak of its incorrect use - for example, in a case where a term is defined in a certain sense yet is used in a different sense in a passage, or when one concept replaces another without any change in the term used." At times the author seems to have difficulty making his mind up on whether he respects the reader's capacity to make some fundamental deductions. However none of this should put off those who are concerned about the essence and who are not fazed easily by the style. At the end of the day though, this book will be judged by how well the historical method it promotes illuminates the Soviet experience. Loone understands this and adds a postscript (circa 1989) in which he tries to apply his philosophy of history in this manner.

His verdict is devastating and coincides with that of many Western scholars Marxist (eg. Alex Callinicos) and non-Marxist (eg. Alec Nove) alike. In stark language he concludes that "It can be reasonably argued in Marxist terms that, after a short experiment with slavery, the Soviet Union is now a feudal society or a complex built of feudalism and slavery". I had to pause after reading this. Once I could breath again normally, other conclusions appeared to me less overwhelming and highly predictable. Loone concedes that perhaps capitalism is a step forward for Russia if it acts as an escape route out of the neo-feudal order. In a manner at odds with many passages in the book, he dismisses Lenin as a self-deceiver and, with hindsight, casts serious doubt on the feasibility of socialism in the USSR.

After reading Loone's book, I confess to having felt depressed and unwilling to engage with his conclusions. With a defeated Soviet Union replaced by slavich chieftains and roaming bands of neo-Cossacks, it is not so much wrong or impossible to argue against his conclusions but dispiriting. Then I felt a second tier of melancholy quite independent of his conclusions. Here we have a well-read, well-intentioned Marxist scholar who is clearly committed to prising the humanist and scientific aspects of Marxism apart from the secular religion to which the Central Committee had condemned it. And yet at the core of Loone's thought I detect a profoundly uncritical spirit which never ceases to dominate even when his heart wants to be open and critical.

The reader can notice this at many levels: When Loone wants to discuss analytical philosophy, he describes. In his references to game theory, he merely refers to it. Whenever he alludes to the work of Thomas Kuhn or Jon Elster, again the reader is informed of these people's efforts. Never does he actually *engage* with any of this.

Nowhere is he critical, in the old-fashioned sense. (He reminds me of a long standing member of the Italian communist part who insisted he was no longer communist because that was what the party expected of him.) Ultimately, when in his postscript he tries to tell us what his book has to offer to the analysis of the ex-USSR, he produces a weak journalistic piece the production of which does not require even the faintest grasp of the philosophy of history in the preceding two hundred and thirty pages.

This is such a pity. For there is a great deal of material in the preceding pages which can throw rational light on the USSR experience in ways that have not been paralleled by non-Marxist analyses. It would not be too unfair to say that Loone relays this material to us like the monks of the middle ages who transcribed Aristotle and Sophocles: without participation! And just as Aristotle's and Sophocles' words remained full of interpretative and contemporary meaning untouched by the stifling middle ages environment which preserved them for us, so does the Marxist philosophy of history in this book emerge fresh and unscathed. The jury is still out on many of Soviet society's features (eg. the 1930s collectivisation, the Central Plan, the emphasis on industrialisation etc.). The one sin for which that society must be censured without delay is its success at weeding out of its intellectuals the capacity to think as originally, critically and iconoclastically as the founders of Marxism.

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