

Eagleton, Terry. *Why Marx Was Right*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

The world is divided into two parts—the one that hears Marxism with discord, and the one that still wishes to romance the idea. We can find these two factions not just in the West, but also in the non-Western world, where Marxism has made its influence felt. Marxism is now viewed with utter coldness, and is treated as a metaphor for violence. One witnesses a wide variety of allegations against Marx(ism) for which neither Karl Marx nor Marxism can really be held responsible. The disparagement of Marx is always accompanied by strong claims about the “triumph of capitalist democracy.” It is to be noted that it is no easy task to propose how the world ought to progress, and while progressing, what it needs to take account of. Critics have given several explanations as to why Marxism is an outmoded doctrine, though they are myopic in nature. Is it that Marx’s ideas are off the target, no longer suitable to our times? Many scholars in the past opined that there is a good sense of anachronism in his thought. Is that still the case? How do we interpret and evaluate the nature of the world we live in in the advanced globalized world?

These questions require a cautious but ruthless critical sense. Terry Eagleton’s *Why Marx Was Right* very elaborately delineates all of the possible objections against Marx and Marxism. At the beginning and the end of the book, Eagleton asks two striking questions: Can Marxism now be safely buried? (p. x) And was ever a thinker so travestied? (p. 239) His analysis traverses an interesting path between these two questions, offering several arguments that tell us unashamedly that there is still much sense in Marx, that he was right on many fronts.

First, Eagleton takes on the allegation that “Marxism is finished, has no relevance in the post-industrial society” (p. 1). In this claim, we can see the self-righteous attitude of post-industrial capitalism, suggesting that the Western capitalist framework has resolved all of the dilemmas of inequality and problems of justice created by the excesses of wealth and power. “All-is-well” is the principle on which capitalism functions. Eagleton rightly mentions that the only reason for critics’ discrediting of Marxism is its political impotence. Certainly, Marxism is not *off the agenda*. On the other hand, the more capitalism growls about the irrelevance and demise of Marx(ism), the more such cavils make Marxism relevant. This relevance is due to the deplorable consequences of capitalism: Eagleton rightly mentions Mike Davis and Tristram Hunt’s reference to the pathological conditions in which people live in many parts of the world, under the self-proclaimed

capitalist triumph (emphasis added).¹ Eagleton rightly asks, “What if it is not Marxism that is outdated but capitalism itself?” (p. 9) Asserting that Marx was right, we have to ask how Marxism manifests itself in the socio-political structures of grossly unequal societies.

The second allegation is that Marxism is good only in theory, and in reality has resulted in violence, tyranny, and mass murder on an inconceivable scale (p. 11). There is half-truth in this allegation. However, it is not just Stalinism, Maoism, and other socialist pathologies that bear the burden of violence in the twentieth century. For instance, the violence of cold war and post-cold war politics took place because of *both* capitalist and communist actions and policies. That capitalism’s crimes are not as organized as socialist crimes does not wash its hands of sin. The crimes of capitalism are and have been an on-going affair, and in many ways worse than those of socialism. Eagleton gets it right in stating that the wealth capitalism claims to have brought in is at the cost of the woeful lives that the masses of people have lived and are living (p. 15). What has the wealth of capitalism created? And for whom is it created? These questions need not be purely ethical but discreetly evaluative. How should scarce resources be managed for the benefit of all? With several kinds of inequalities that capitalism supports (in the name of progress and development), Eagleton’s concern is very genuine, that socialism proved impossible where it was most necessary (p. 20). But how does one judge the successful manifestation of an idea in society? Both capitalists and socialists ought to do some soul-searching in understanding their respective theoretical foundations and their practical application. However, Eagleton’s defense of market socialism is not convincing in the sense that he has yet to prove that these three—private property, class, and exploitation—are done away with by the advent of market socialism (p. 24).

Is Marxism deterministic in the strict sense of the term? This last allegation discussed is that Marxism is a form of determinism, stripping us of our freedom and individuality (p. 30). Eagleton here offers a lengthy discussion of Marx’s dictum that “[t]he history of all previously existing societies is the history of class struggle.” Marx was mainly concerned with the evolution of productive forces over a period of time, and the manner in which people share the surplus (the primary concern of the class-struggle). This is well understood only when one understands the dynamics of the relationship between the forces of production and the relations of production. Which prevails over the other? Is there any dialectic involved? Marx talks of change, resulting from the conflict between the forces and relations of production from one era to another. But why does not the conflict end in one phase? Or had Marx dreamt of sowing the seeds of a total resolution to class conflict under

¹ See Terry Eagleton, “Was Marx Right?” *Commonweal*, March 28, 2001, accessed online at: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/was-marx-right>, citing Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2007), and Tristram Hunt, “War of the Words,” *The Guardian*, May 8, 2009, accessed online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/09/engels-condition-of-working-class>.

socialism, attaining completion in communism? Eagleton asks an appropriate question here: “[H]ow can we know that a specific set of social relations will be useful for revolution?” (p. 42) It is incumbent on us to ask what kind of changes in social relations occurs owing to the expansion of productive forces. Asking this question would mean that there is no necessity in the dominance of productive forces over social relations (p. 44).

If Marxism is deterministic, its determinism arises from the excesses of capitalism itself. These unendurable excesses, by history’s internal logic (of one stage paving way for the other) make socialism inevitable. In this sense, Marx rightly passes the buck onto individuals—what they do as free men and women becomes more central to our understanding of the human condition. Inevitability in Marxism certainly has some normative appeal. “Socialism is inevitable” can also be interpreted as saying that socialism ought to take over the mischiefs of capitalism. Avoiding randomization and adopting the deterministic principle may sound as if Marx is talking about the iron laws of history. But these laws are not strictly deterministic because they are not teleological (p. 57). Marx’s determinism does not operate on the law of necessity, but as successive steps of the human condition. Here, transformation is also a moral issue. It is ethical in the sense that it tries to understand the relationship between material wealth and moral health. Eagleton asks another brilliant question: “How long would socialism have to survive, and how vigorously would it need to flourish, to justify in retrospect to the sufferings of class history?” (p. 61). This question reflects our apprehension that socialism promises too much, promises backed only by the yet bigger promise of overthrowing capitalism.

Is this bigger promise totally utopian in nature? Eagleton addresses critics’ allegation that Marxism is utopian, and that it believes in the possibility of a perfect society, without hardship, violence, suffering, or conflict (p. 64). This criticism indicates utter unreasonability on the part of such critics. Eagleton is right in reiterating and defending the point that Marx was never desirous or hopeful of a perfectly conflict-free society. He aptly asserts that it is capitalism that trades in such a future, if one looks back into its historical growth (p. 64). If there is a better world to be attained, Marx is right to claim that that better world is a world of material interests only. In this sense, emancipatory politics needs to have a renewed understanding. Breaking away from the present also amounts to a certain break-up with the past. Which characteristics of the past will be passed on to the new society? Marx expresses his concern for this in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*. Breaking away from the present may also mean that the present is subject to extreme sacrifices to build a promising tomorrow. This forethought for the future is not to be confused with the futuristic fantasies central to liberalism, but are well-grounded in the prosaic workings of the present (p. 76).

Is there then a way to avoid the brute principle of liberalism? (p. 86) In the pursuit of socialism, flourishing in common is the goal. This also involves the exercise of freedom of men and women in various ways. This is the reason why human beings are treated not only as “species beings,” but also

as “material beings” (as needy, sensuous, and physiological beings [p. 131]). So too the future is based on material conditions. But how does this change from the present to the future occur? For Marx, says Eagleton, it took centuries for capitalism to get rid of feudalism (p. 93). Similarly, it may take even longer for the fall of capitalism, when its influence shatters under the weight of widespread discontent. It may take more time due to capitalism’s several modes of self-perpetuation.

Eagleton proceeds by mentioning the fifth allegation, that Marxism is nothing but mere economic determinism. Marxism gives priority to economics but does not make it absolutely deterministic. Critics point out that there are many other determinant factors as important or more important than economics. They claim that Marxism is indifferent to these pluralistic, hierarchically organized factors; they intend to strengthen their critique of Marx to the effect that Marxism leaves no place for individualism. Eagleton counters these accusations with two important points: First, it is mere oversimplification to reduce Marxism to economic determinism. Second, production is not just the making of machines and turbines (p. 116). Marx seems to have been concerned with the aesthetics of production and took production to be an art form (Marx’s view is that human beings are productive creatures [p. 138]). Production has to be carried out for its own sake, for human enjoyment (p. 124).

The preceding point answers the sixth allegation against Marx, namely, that his materialist obsessions have created human atrocities. In fact, this priority of the material enables the working class to expel the dreary blight of capitalism. For only through an alternate mode of material production can one overcome the ill fate under capitalism. This emphasis on materiality confers value on the body, refuting idealist versions of the mind/body dichotomy. Reason on this view becomes consciousness placed in the *material* condition of the organism possessing it. Besides treating economic activity as a thing-in-itself, human beings should be able to shape a narrative out of them. A very significant point needs to be mentioned here: We see that there is an emphasis on “flourishing in common” in a way that “reconciles individual and society.” Marx’s emphasis on materiality implies a certain space for others—everyone can make a living out of the limited resources available to all of us.

The seventh allegation against Marx is that he is too obsessed with class-consciousness. Post-industrial and post-capitalist thinkers find Marx’s class-centric orientation futile. Their worry is that contrary to Marxism there are others besides the Marxian working class who toil and whom Marxism ignores. Furthermore, critics claim that women are totally under-represented within Marxism. Eagleton rebuts the latter point by observing that from the time of Marx to the era of the Third World, woman has been a symbol of the proletariat (p. 169). There may well be a point in expanding the scope of the working class, including people involved in the service and information sectors. Even then such an explanation may not serve the purpose. For Marx, the proletariat is not just *a* class of workers, but a class bestowed with the

power of revolutionary, solidaristic fervor. This characteristic is missing in those classes that emerged after the apparently widespread recognition of the “triumph of capitalism,” namely, the capacity to fight exploitation. The drawback of this broader “working class” is its inability to recognize that it is being exploited, and its inability to find fault with capitalist democracy. Eagleton is right to say that revolution is impossible from those sections of society where some people, such as capitalists, are contented with their conditions (p. 193).

Breaking away from the present, seeking change in the social relations of production, demands real action on the part of those who desire that change. This way, we have seen, the action in question is not mere intellectual dialogue. But critics attack Marxism stating that it advocates violence and espouses the principle that “the end justifies the means” (p. 179). Eagleton discusses the claim that there are also peaceful revolutions (velvet revolutions) (p. 180). If revolution takes place peacefully, then how revolutionary could it be? Eagleton mentions two interesting points here. First, he rightly opines that political changes occurring by a slight push will not have an impact. Second, he aptly mentions Walter Benjamin’s understanding that revolution means applying emergency brakes to a speeding train (p. 187). Here one can compare and contrast the “kind” of impacts both peaceful and violent revolutions have brought. However, Eagleton’s point that successful revolutions are those which end up by erasing all traces of themselves (p. 181) is not convincing. As mentioned above, there are cases where socialist revolutions brought terror and violence. Confining oneself to this allegation shows the prejudicial attitude of the critics.

Furthermore, critics suggest that violence-laden socialism results in a despotic state that violates individual freedom (p. 196). Marx’s concern should be grasped properly. Ultimately, who gets the favor of power structures in the society? It is needless to restate how the state under capitalism favors the rich with token recognition of the poor or the downtrodden. Eagleton alerts the reader, stating that “state socialism” itself is an ambiguous concept. However, this does not resolve our perplexities altogether. The state under socialism may be repressive for the reason that all private property needs to be abolished, and as Marx says the state collapses under communism (p. 208). Even if we admit this for a moment, however, it is plausible enough to think that “administrative bodies” will turn repressive as much as, or even more than, the state. Here, we are reminded of critics’ allegation that Marx(ism) has a somewhat weak sense of politics and power (with respect to political impotence and political quietism). Eagleton’s analysis is a balancing act here. Marx’s treatment of power as a thing-in-itself, he argues, has both positive and negative dimensions. Its positive aspect is that as power-in-itself is not to be treated as an instrument of domination. On the other hand, it is negative because of its luxuriating nature for its own sake.

The point discussed above somehow reflects critics’ feeling that there are perspectives other than Marxism that have understood power structures properly. The final allegation discussed by Eagleton is that many

radical movements have emerged outside Marxism, and whatever political left remains takes account of the post-industrial, post-class world (p. 211). Critics assert that questions about sexuality, feminist politics, and consumption are some of the significant worries that Marxism overlooks. But Marx suggests that all suffering can ultimately be resolved through class struggle. Going by this argument, it is implausible on the part of critics to say that the scope of Marxism is too narrow. Eagleton rightly informs readers that Marxism has inspired three of the greatest political struggles of the modern age: resistance to colonialism, emancipation of women, and the fight against fascism (p. 216). What is the nature of these struggles? Have they embraced whatever good was reminiscent in those things which they opposed? Eagleton mentions two important points of postmodernism that lack validity: one is that Marxism is Eurocentric, and the other is that Marxism is “biologistic” (p. 232). Though much of the emancipatory rhetoric is Eurocentric, the urge for emancipation always has universal appeal. Second, the reciprocal relationship between Self and Nature is not necessarily biological reductionism. Eagleton rightly mentions that Marx’s inclusion of human society into natural history genuinely calls for human dignity and welfare.

On the whole, Eagleton has adequately addressed all of the allegations of significance to both Marx and Marxism. From the discussions above we can strongly assert that there is no need to bury Marx(ism), no matter what critics say. Eagleton’s attempt is commendable in this regard. Critics’ claims that Marxism has less or no relevance in the post-industrial and post-capitalist world are a mere counterfeit. If capitalism is a righteous doctrine, then it has to explain why there is so much suffering in the world it has created. It cannot escape with the claim that capitalism is not, but socialism is, responsible for it, or by asserting that suffering is the fate of the people. Eagleton’s arguments point out that people in the age of the assumed triumph of global capitalism should be alert to the possibility of seduction by liberal-capitalist fantasies. A genuine question emerges here: Does capitalism protect individual freedom in the real sense? Whatever problems critics say that the Marxist framework fails to address, are present in capitalist societies as well. Retaining the relevance and significance of Marx enables us to have deeper reflection on what exactly human freedom is. For all of the problems we face today, mere piecemeal and peaceful movements will not erase what needs to be erased. For that we need large-scale integration of revolutionary concerns into a single revolt, as Marx intended. We need, as Marx thought, a class of classes (proletariat).

Nevertheless, Eagleton’s defense of Marxism should not make Marxism into an absolute idea. Eagleton’s book would have been improved by elaboration on three points. (1) It is obvious that Marx’s understanding of human nature is totally different from liberalism. By contrast with liberalism, Marx attributes a hardcore moral sensibility to the working class. Can we sustain that? (2) In Marx’s determinism, inevitability also speaks as desirability, which ultimately makes communism the desired human condition. Eagleton could have thrown more light on the idea of *closure* in

Marx. What if history fails and inevitability goes off the track? (3) While talking about transformation, Eagleton might usefully have elaborated on Marx's scheme of the state's collapse into an "administrative body." There are several instances in which this collapse does not appear to have happened, creating socialist states as sponsors of real terror. Eagleton doesn't say enough to dispel the relevant fears.

It is always difficult to write a book on Marx, especially in the current climate of opinion. But Eagleton's book is enchantingly lucid, informative, and an eye-opener. It offers clarifications that would help not only those sympathetic to Marx and Marxism, but also to those unsympathetic to both. Above all, the book comes at the right time in history—when so many are clouded by the fantasy of global capitalist triumph.

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