

Review by Don Milligan

## Why Marx Was Right

Terry Eagleton

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“Was ever a thinker so travestied?”

**T**erry Eagleton ends *Why Marx Was Right* with this rhetorical question: “Was ever a thinker so travestied?” This is a fitting end to a book which is a lament for the wicked ways of a world that has done so much damage to the thought and legacy of Karl Marx, piling misconception upon misconception, so that the emancipatory promise of the great man’s books and pamphlets has sunk under the weight of lies and half truths.

Over the course of ten chapters Eagleton discusses the falsification of Marx’s approach to human nature, economic life, materialism, class, the state, and violent revolution. He challenges the notion that Marx’s ideas are outmoded and that the ‘new social movements’ gathered around the banners of anti-capitalism and alter-globalization represent, in any essential sense, a departure from Marx’s struggle for a better future.

Marx’s utopianism was derived from the real world of the present, from the way in which the antagonistic social relations characteristic of capitalism, contain the seeds of a communist future, which is always gleaned from the present. Capitalism has produced untold wealth, the capacity to feed, house, clothe, and educate, everybody on the planet, from this we can see that Marx’s belief that the future could be “a vast improvement on the present” (100) becomes an entirely plausible, even modest, aspiration, if only we could find a way to overcome the barriers to achieving a fairer distribution of wealth.

“Would everything be perfect in this communist paradise of yours?”

“No, of course not”, replies Eagleton,

“[. . .] there would be plenty of problems, a host of conflicts and a number of irreparable tragedies. There would be child murders, road accidents, wretchedly bad novels, lethal jealousies, overweening ambitions, tasteless trousers and inconsolable grief. There might also be some cleaning of the latrines.” (101)

Eagleton ends the litany of woes that might beset the communist future with the “cleaning of latrines”, no doubt, as a way of emphasizing, “Marxists are hardheaded types who are sceptical of high-minded moralism and wary of idealism.” (77) But still, “latrines” is an odd choice of words with an audience more familiar with cleaning toilets, bathrooms, or even lavatories. “Latrines” has a military or temporary ring about it, something one might find in a refugee camp; I can almost see comrade Eagleton, shovel in hand, digging the ditch for us all to shit in.

Despite these lapses of taste, Eagleton has done a good job in correcting a mass of misconceptions concerning Marx’s thought. He is at his best in Chapter Three when discussing determinism and Marx’s conception of history and social change, and at his worst in Chapter Six when attempting to place Marx’s materialism within the tradition of European philosophical thought. Eagleton’s presentation of the so-called ‘mind-body problem’ is shoddy to say the least, and his asides about Locke and Hume (137) are lazy and one-sided. Doubtless he has been led into these infelicities and slips by his resolutely jaunty and upbeat tone; it is a tone maintained throughout the book, which I imagine is calculated to help readers unfamiliar with Marxist theory to grasp the scale of the distortions that have taken place.

On the whole this book successfully defends Marx from what E. P. Thompson might have called the “enormous condescension of history”. Marx was a vivid and complicated thinker. A man committed to finding a way forward so

that most people might be freed from the unremitting toil, drudgery, and violence, which have hitherto characterised the lives of the vast majority of people who have ever lived on the planet. Eagleton, with some wit and passion, makes abundantly clear that there is nothing outmoded about this view or this aspiration; literally billions of people continue to be consigned by capitalist relations of production to inadequate food, housing, and education, to wretched conditions that blight every aspect of their self-development.

This focus upon immiseration has serious consequences for the book. Strikingly, Eagleton pays no attention to the different ways that capitalism functions in different parts of the world, or has changed its modus operandi, as it has grown and prospered. Capitalism is thought of as a single world system and Marx's critique is presented in a similar manner, as if there is no difference between Marx's analytical abstractions and the way economic relations actually work out in practice. Pride of place is given to Marx's political rhetoric, his thought and writings are said to be all about struggling to overcome the barriers to solidarity and the full realisation of human creativity.

This strategy has led Eagleton to assimilate his defence of Marx's thought into a defence of the outlook and activity of 'Marxists', 'Marxism', and of socialism in general. *Almost by sleight of hand Eagleton's explication of Marx's thought has become a defence of the Marxist or communist tradition.* It is here that we find the central flaw in the book, because the truth, which Eagleton must surely know, is that most of the lies and misconceptions concerning Marx's ideas and aspirations, have arisen, not as a consequence of faulty reading or even of bad faith, but in connection with the political writings and practice of twentieth century Marxists.

It is Marxists, not the *Daily Mail*, *Fox News* (48), or the bourgeoisie, that have given Marx a bad name.

The entire book is an exercise in attempting to find Marx innocent of crimes for which he had no responsibility, and in forgetting the crimes for which Marxists have undoubtedly had more than a casual or circumstantial hand in committing. This is why, search as you might, you will find no mention

in this book of the hybrid theoretical creations of Marxism-Leninism and ‘diamat’,<sup>1</sup> or of the organizational innovations of the Leninist Party and democratic centralism.<sup>2</sup>

The way in which Eagleton deals with the knotty problem presented by the phrase, ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’, illustrates the problem that eats away at the coherence and relevance of this book. He explains:

“The dictatorship of the proletariat meant simply rule by the majority. In any case, the word “dictatorship” in Marx’s time did not necessarily suggest what it does today. It meant an extralegal breach of a political constitution. Marx’s political sparring partner Auguste Blanqui, a man who had the distinction of being gaoled by every French government from 1815 to 1880, coined the phrase “dictatorship of the proletariat” to mean rule on behalf on the common people; Marx himself used it to mean government by them.” (204-5)

So what has led to the misconception that Marx believed in *what we now mean* by dictatorship? Is it simply an historical misunderstanding? I think not. Which is why this question cannot be discussed without reference to the Bolsheviks, and quite specifically to the political practice of Lenin, who installed a mode of rule, which *we would now call* dictatorship, explicitly under the rubric of the “dictatorship of the proletariat”. It was a mode of rule in which all

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘dialectical materialism’ arose during the late nineteenth century in reference to the work of Marx and Engels; it was developed by Joseph Dietzgen in ‘Social-Democratic Philosophy’, first published in *Volkstaat*, 1876. See also Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science*, 1878, New York: International Publishers, 1966. Engels’ other essays and notes on science were gathered together in Moscow and published in 1925 as *Dialectics of Nature*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1977). Subsequently, during the dictatorship of Joseph Stalin, the ideas expressed in these texts were codified and became keystone in the arch of the official ideology of Marxism-Leninism.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Democratic centralism’ was the form of party organization in which the minority was always subordinate to the majority and the lower organs of the party were always subordinate to the higher ones. Discussion was allowed during a limited period before congresses and during congresses, but after decisions were taken, no expression of disagreement or dissent was permissible.

other revolutionary and democratic parties were banned, in which all disagreement within the communist party was suppressed.<sup>3</sup> Lenin created a state, which was ruled by decree, a state in which commissars armed with pleni-potentiary powers and revolvers, exercised more or less arbitrary rule over what was nominally “soviet” society. It was Lenin and the practice of Marxist-Leninists that redefined what “dictatorship of the proletariat” meant in both theory and practice. It certainly had nothing to do with either Auguste Blanqui or Karl Marx.

Eagleton doesn’t entirely dodge this issue; he just says things that he must know to be untrue. He insists that socialism is about popular self-government (188) and asserts, “Socialist revolutions can only be democratic ones.” (188-9) Despite these assertions he refers to the Bolshevik dictatorship, which was consolidated during the course of 1918, as a “socialist state”:

“The Bolsheviks were able to leap from a part-feudalist Russia to a socialist state without living through a prolonged interlude of extensive capitalism.” (56)

Perhaps Eagleton should have pressed, “so-called socialist”, into service; this is the standby phrase that he uses liberally to cover the development of “so-called socialism” under the management of Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, who he readily concedes were responsible for “botched, bloody experiments which made the very idea of socialism stink” (15) Here the use of the word “experiment” is terrifying in its suggestion that these dictators were simply trying out a few theories, rather than imposing their rule by the routine imposition of terror. Despite his defence of the Bolsheviks, and of Lenin’s tyranny, Eagleton can appear, at times, to be

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<sup>3</sup> At the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in March 1921 all factions and dissent within the Russian Communist Party were banned and Lenin expressed himself very clearly, “all members of the Russian Communist Party who are in the slightest degree suspicious or unreliable . . . should be got rid of”. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, (1982; 1994), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, p.201.

unequivocal in his condemnation of “so-called socialist” dictatorships:

“In its brief but bloody career, Marxism has involved a hideous amount of violence. Both Stalin and Mao Zedong were mass murderers on an almost unimaginable scale. Yet few Marxists today, as we have seen already, would seek to defend these horrific crimes, whereas many non-Marxists would defend, say, the destruction of Dresden or Hiroshima.” (184)<sup>4</sup>

However, when he says “that few Marxists today . . . would seek to defend these horrific crimes” he has overlooked his own decision to ‘forget’ Vladimir Ilyich Lenin and Felix Dzerzhinsky’s<sup>5</sup> government by decree, and *Red Terror* (18-20)<sup>6</sup>, and the mitigations he offers very early in this book for the subsequent dictatorships:

“But the so-called socialist system had its achievements, too. China and the Soviet Union dragged their citizens out of economic backwardness into the modern industrial world, at however horrific a human cost; and the cost was so steep partly because of the hostility of the capitalist West. That hostility also forced the Soviet Union into an arms race that crippled its arthritic economy even further, and finally pressed it to the point of collapse.

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<sup>4</sup> It is notable that Eagleton makes comparison with acts of war committed by capitalist states that were in alliance with the Soviet Union at the time of the destruction of Dresden and Hiroshima, and the lawless violence of Stalinist regimes, which imposed their writ by terror in both peace and war.

<sup>5</sup> Felix Dzerzhinsky was appointed head of the Bolshevik’s secret police in late December 1917 – he pioneered the procedures of arbitrary arrest, summary extrajudicial execution, and “Red Terror” that became integral to communist rule in Russia and elsewhere.

<sup>6</sup> Eagleton writes, “The Bolshevik revolution was made not by a secret coterie of conspirators but by individuals openly elected in the popular, representative institutions known as soviets.” (186) Yet, he must know that this Bolshevik popularity was severely limited and fleeting, and that the suppression of anarchists, and of all other revolutionary and democratic parties was well-advanced by late summer 1918. This policy had no popular mandate and was resisted by successive revolts and rebellions.

“In the meantime, however, it managed along with its satellites to achieve cheap housing, fuel, transport and culture, full employment and impressive social services for half the citizens of Europe, as well as an incomparably greater degree of equality and (in the end) material well-being than those nations had previously enjoyed. Communist East Germany could boast of one of the finest child care systems in the world. The Soviet Union played a heroic role in combating the evil of fascism, as well as in helping to topple colonialist powers. It also fostered the kind of solidarity among its citizens that Western nations seem able to muster only when they are killing the natives of other lands.” (13-14)

Eagleton seems to be blithely unaware that this hymn of praise sung to what used to be called ‘actually existing socialism’, is not going to lead the general reader to forget the Soviet Union’s vast territorial annexations, and the wholesale deportation of ‘unreliable national minorities’, the condition of Romanian orphanages at the fall of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu, the tanks on the streets of Budapest in 1956 and in Prague in 1968, the shootings on the streets of Poznań in 1956, the tens of millions starved to death during Mao Zedong’s ‘Great Leap Forward’ (1958-1961), or the murder of those attempting to clamber over East Berlin’s “Anti-Fascist Protection Rampart” between 1961 and 1989, or the fact that the German Democratic Republic’s state security police, the Stasi, had around one police informer per family on their books. The general reader will also be well aware of the reign of terror unleashed by China’s so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), aware also that China only started to industrialise on any significant scale two years *after* the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, two years *after* the communist clique committed to “taking the capitalist road” had seized power in Beijing.

This bizarre posture in which the process of forgetting that Lenin introduced government by decree and terror into Russia some years before Joseph Stalin’s rise to power; the

bizarre posture in which Stalinist dictators are commended for having “dragged their citizens out of economic backwardness into the modern industrial world”, is so appalling that Eagleton reasons, not unreasonably, that it’s time for a pithy witticism:

“All this, to be sure, is no substitute for freedom, democracy and vegetables in the shop, but neither is it to be ignored.” (14)

Now, the general reader will also be well aware that the government, led by Winston Churchill and Clement Attlee, in alliance with Ernest Bevin, Herbert Morrison and the British trade unions, in 1940, “fostered a kind of solidarity among its citizens” which enabled Britain to stand firm against “the evil of fascism” without ever going into alliance with fascism – or of joining Hitler in the invasion and partition of Poland – as Joseph Stalin did.<sup>7</sup>

His ham-fisted, but entirely conventional leftist defence of ‘actually existing socialism’ notwithstanding, Eagleton’s broader point is that the horrors committed by “so-called socialist states” must be set beside the horrors which have accompanied capitalist development over the last three centuries. Capitalism enslaved and slaughtered its way into existence too, is Eagleton’s less than reassuring point.

**A**ll this is a long way from explaining why Karl Marx was right. The reason for this is that defending Marx’s legacy is only one part of

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<sup>7</sup> The common leftist claim that Joseph Stalin’s regime was the main bulwark against fascism is undermined by the invasion of Poland, which Stalin coordinated with Adolf Hitler in 1939. The Soviet regime, after Hitler invaded Russia, did subsequently play a key role in defeating the Third Reich, most notably in the defence of Moscow, in the Siege of Leningrad, and at the Battles of Kursk and Stalingrad. However, the partition of Europe between East and West agreed between the Soviet Union, the United States, and Great Britain at Yalta and Potsdam guaranteed a future for dictatorship and terror in Europe. To be sure, what Eagleton calls “the evil of fascism” was defeated by the combined armed forces of Imperialism and Stalinism, and a regime characterized by anti-Semitism, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, the suppression of all independent trade union activity, and of free political and cultural criticism, remained in power for a further forty-five years.



Eagleton's purpose in writing this book – his larger purpose is to defend the Marxist tradition and the broader communist enterprise under the cover of articulating 'what Marx really meant' by materialism, economic production, and the emancipation of the working class. It is Eagleton's less than candid approach, which has muddied the waters into which Marxism has sunk even deeper. I wish he had written a commentary on Marx's ideas, theories, and political practice, and a separate book on what has covered Marxism and Marxism-Leninism in so much blood and dirt. This would have made it easier to disentangle what the conceptual difficulties are regarding communism and tyranny.

Eagleton has included a useful reference to the idea that in a communist future markets might "remain an integral part of a socialist economy". (23) The idea is that centralised public ownership and planning of infrastructure and utilities would be accompanied by a great swathe of the economy in which each firm or enterprise would be a cooperative, owned and governed by its workers, that would compete with other producers within a market. This way some of the worst elements of capitalism would be dispensed with, while retaining the relatively efficient distribution of resources, which the market makes possible. (23-4) This is a fertile idea, but it would not, of course, abolish the market in labour, or the 'law of value', which tells us that the price of a good is determined by the most efficient producer – those who cannot compete in producing a good or service of a comparable quality, at a comparable price, must go out of business, or produce something else. So, although the tyranny of the capitalist boss would be dispensed with, unemployment and the tyranny of the market in which labour and capital flow more or less spontaneously towards the most profitable activities would not.

Against this rather partial solution, and the command economies of Stalinist dictatorships, is offered a prospect of a popularly managed economy where resources in machinery, energy, raw materials, and labour, are allocated by negotiation between popular assemblies and their directly elected representatives. But, here again, there is conflation

between the relatively easy task of workers controlling their particular factory, office, or shop, and the much greater difficulty and complexity involved in running a large dispersed business by democratic means, and the even more challenging idea of attempting to run the world economy by democratic means. The mind boggles, so Eagleton keeps it simple by doubling back to the far simpler task of running one firm:

“Yet one needs at least to take account of the role of modern information technology in oiling the wheels of such a system. Even the former vice-president of Procter & Gamble has acknowledged that it makes workers’ self-management a real possibility.” (26)

Well, yes, workers self-management of a particular workplace is not really the problem; our problem is how to replace capitalism with the democratic management of the world economy. This task is so large that Eagleton concludes that it is time for another joke:

“Much of the dirty and dangerous work could perhaps be carried out by former members of the royal family. We need to reverse our priorities.” (27)

This neatly sidesteps the central argument of those who attack the very possibility of democratic socialism, those who argue like the old anti-socialist theorists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek,<sup>8</sup> that socialism is intrinsically tyrannical. Their case is not dependent upon reference to Lenin, Stalin or Mao Zedong; it depends instead upon the observation that without the market, the allocation of material resources and labour is carried out by the administrative and political decisions of a political leadership, or of a bureaucracy. With the abolition of the labour market would come, inevitably, the conscription or direction

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<sup>8</sup> See Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1936; F. A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, London: Routledge, 1944.

of labour – as in the Stalinist economies. Anti-socialist thinkers have never been persuaded that popular forms of socialist democracy would ever be able to overcome this problem, and the Marxist movement has signally failed to answer them with serious engagement, let alone furnish them with a convincing answer. Consequently, we are to put it bluntly, stumped, trapped between the tyranny of the market, and the tyranny inherent in politicising the management of the entire economy.

Yet, Eagleton insists that this is not so, because socialists have specified how the transition from what Marx referred to as “pre-history” to the *history proper* of our emancipated future:

“As a socialist, you have to be prepared to spell out in some detail how this would be achieved, and what institutions it would involve.” (73)

Eagleton then, in the time-honoured manner prescribed by Friedrich Engels,<sup>9</sup> immediately rows back from this promise:

“But if the new social order is to be genuinely transformative, it follows that there is a strict limit on how much you can say about it right now. We can, after all, describe the future only in terms drawn from the past or present; and a future which broke radically from the past or present would have us straining at the limits of our language.” (73-4)

So the truth is that robust critics of socialism like Ludwig von Mises go unanswered, and we are invited into the emancipated future on a wing and a prayer.

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Engels, *Anti-During: Herr Duhring's Revolution in Science*, 1878, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1943; Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, 1880, Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976.

**M**arxism has been defeated because the Marxist movement has been defeated. This defeat is no small thing. It is not the result of misinformation regarding our real intentions or of people's ignorance of the finer points of Marxist theory. Our defeat has arisen from our failure to come to grips with the nature of capitalism as it has developed. Marx lived at a time when the working class was excluded from society in every meaningful sense. Workers in 1850 or 1860 in England were not consumers, beyond the bare essentials; their exclusion from the enjoyment of bourgeois culture, and from participation in political life, was more or less complete. This, coupled with what appeared to Marx, to be the near certainty that workers would get poorer and more miserable, undermined his capacity to see exactly how capitalism would not simply survive, but would flourish with the acquiescence and often the fulsome approval of the working class.<sup>10</sup>

This was because capitalism in England, and later in the other advanced countries, did what no other polity had ever done before – they began to incorporate the exploited class into the political and economic arrangements of the society. In a long process of struggle, ably aided by the progressive intelligentsia and far-seeing sections of the capitalist class, working people won the right to found trade unions, churches, and a host of other well-regulated institutions, the right to vote, the right to an education, the right to pensions, medical treatment, and the right to own and inherit property. Unlike slave owners, or feudal lords, the capitalists have actively drawn the very people whom they exploit into a web of positive relationships with the system over which they preside.<sup>11</sup> In an entirely unprecedented manner the

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<sup>10</sup> In some places Marx seems to believe that in England a more democratic transition might be possible, but overall his account of immiseration appears to have been the one preferred by the communist movement. Eagleton calls the democratic and material concessions wrung from the capitalist class “scraps and leavings” (194) with which the rulers attempt to “buy off revolution”.

<sup>11</sup> The expression “incorporation” which I am using here should not be confused or conflated with ‘social mobility’ because many highly stratified societies have permitted movement between one status and another without allowing exploited persons, slaves, serfs, free peasants and artisans or free town labourers any role whatsoever in the political affairs of society.

capitalist class, responded to the difficulties inherent in managing vast new urban populations, and their own need for increasingly well-educated and sophisticated workers, by incorporating the working class fully into the capitalist system itself.

Everywhere that capitalism has deep roots, and is relatively stable and successful, this process of incorporation is well advanced. Marxists have encountered this development, as the accumulation of “reforms” in which they have often played a prominent role in fighting for, but they have largely been unable to overcome the barriers presented by the wholesale incorporation of the workers into the system. Working class people in wealthy capitalist countries do not find Marx and Engels’s proposition, “The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains”, either true or persuasive.

Indeed workers in well-established capitalist countries have never come close to rejecting capitalism wholesale, or to opting for socialist revolution. In some countries, like France or Italy, they might well have voted communist in their millions, but this was always a calculation aimed at getting more or better reforms – it never formed part of a revolutionary strategy. In Britain workers have often elected communist agitators into positions of authority in trades unions and housing associations – in fact into any position where you might need a tough and reliable militant to face down the bosses, the landlord, or those in authority – but these same working people in Britain have never been tempted on any significant scale to break from the Liberal, Conservative, or Labour management of capitalism.

Of course, Eagleton knows this to be true, which is precisely why he feels constrained to concede, “The bad news for socialists is that men and women will be extremely reluctant to transform their situation as long as there is still something in that situation for them.” (193) But, knowing this does not prevent him from espousing, and repeating Karl Marx’s view that the

worker gains nothing from her or his participation in the labour process:

“Because the working class has no real stake in the status quo, it is partly invisible within it; but for just the same reason it can prefigure an alternative future.” (167)

Although, this is repeated as an article of faith, Eagleton surely knows that this is not how any significant section of the working class in any advanced capitalist country has ever understood their situation. This truth has surely accounted for the popularity of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism in poorer parts of the world, where immiseration, and oligarchic arrangements have ensured that great masses of working people are entirely excluded from full participation in economic, social, and political life, and do actually appear to gain nothing very much from the system at all.<sup>12</sup> It also accounts for the way in which the struggles of peasants and labourers in poor countries have over the years fired the imaginations of revolutionary socialist students and intellectuals in wealthy countries. The wretched of the earth,<sup>13</sup> and the nationalist elites who find themselves in colonial and neo-colonial circumstances, seem to be the only people for whom Marxism-Leninism has ever held much appeal (216-18).

None of this means that Marx’s insights and thoughts about capitalism are irrelevant. Eagleton is entirely right about this, particularly when he lucidly explains the conflict that arises between the *forces* and the *relations* of production. (30-63) This is when, Marx observed technical innovation and novel methods of workplace organization begin to be held back or hampered in some way by the nature of ownership in force, or the political arrangements in play. Because it remains entirely

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<sup>12</sup> See Hernando de Soto, *The Mystery of Capital: Why Capitalism Triumphs in the West and Fails Everywhere Else*, London: Bantam, 2000.

<sup>13</sup> See Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (1961; 1965), London: Penguin, 1967.

true that while capitalism, for the first time in human history, introduced a form of social organization in which perpetual technical invention has created untold wealth, the same form of social organization has the paradoxical effect of restricting the enjoyment of that wealth.

Beyond the sphere of state funded activities nothing is produced in capitalist society unless its production will result in value creation – capital must be expanded and profits must be made – or a particular good or service, no matter how much it may actually be needed, will quite simply not be produced. The effects of this simple truth can be seen in slums and favelas across the world, in famines, droughts, pollution, untreated diseases and ill-health, in the wretched ill-educated lives of billions of people. The terrible truth is that for every million or so people lifted out of absolute poverty by the spread of capitalist industry, new millions are sucked to the sink of destitution – despite the most extraordinary achievements, capitalism is not gaining on the absolute level of human misery – something other than capitalism is evidently required.

The difficulty for those of us interested in promoting and strengthening social solidarity is that the abolition of private property and the imposition of state regulated equality has been an unmitigated disaster since the great October Revolution of 1917. What we discovered there was that if you deprive Grand Duchesses of their estates, the capitalist of his factory, the bourgeois of his silver samovar, and even make them shovel snow in the streets of Petrograd, very soon the workers will not be able to keep possession of their lunch, nor the peasant her chickens, and all will find themselves, in perfect equality, shovelling snow – all, that is, apart from the commissars and intellectuals approved by the workers' state.

Yet still capitalism remains a severely class divided society, spurred on to relentless invention, and simultaneously disfigured, by the profit motive; it is a society in which social solidarity is perpetually undermined, not just by the profit motive, but also by class division and the private ownership of the means of production. In the course

of challenging some fashionable ideas of classlessness Eagleton points out, “the working class includes all those who are forced to sell their labour power to capital, who languish under its oppressive disciplines and who have little or no control over their conditions of labour.” (170) He is undoubtedly correct about this. Society really is divided between those who perform entirely routine manual or clerical labour, those who have some professional measure of job control, and those who participate in the ownership and executive direction of businesses of one kind or another. These are broad categories and there are many distinctions and qualifications that can be made,<sup>14</sup> but none of them undermines Eagleton’s central proposition that a society divided between a mass of workers on the one hand, and a small minority of owners, and their professional staff, on the other, is destined to be the site of endless struggle between the capitalists who decide what and how everything will be made and distributed, and the workers who are deprived of all control over their workplace and their jobs.

However, as workplace organization is rapidly changing in most sectors of the economy in response to new technologies the nature of labour discipline is also rapidly changing. In the old industrial industries a minimum of engagement was required from the great mass of workers; an army of foremen, charge-hands, shop stewards, and dues collectors, maintained surveillance and strict discipline. Nowadays, however, in one sector after another, workers are required to maintain an active and self-motivated interest in the quality and nature of the goods or services being produced. Workers are required to ‘buy into’ the ethos and goals of the company to a degree, which was rare, if not entirely unknown, in the past. Of course, in call-centres, and in many other places, the old style of high surveillance and rigorous timekeeping discipline prevails, but increasingly the nature of the technology, and of the products and

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<sup>14</sup> See Don Milligan, ‘Class: A Note: The Classification of People in Capitalist Society’, Lectures & Notes, Studies in Anti-Capitalism, 2010, [http://www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net/LECTURES&NOTES\\_files/CLASS.pdf](http://www.studiesinanti-capitalism.net/LECTURES&NOTES_files/CLASS.pdf)



services being produced require high levels of interest and engagement from much more sophisticated well-educated workers.

These changes might well open up new opportunities for workers to intervene in executive decisions and to challenge the unbridled control of the capitalist class – it is very early days yet – but a situation in which the discrete and highly articulated co-operation of the worker begins to be a routine requirement of the production process – a new dynamic might well expose private capitalists to more and more demands for co-operative management and executive control of their enterprises.<sup>15</sup> Just as the capitalist class has been compelled to introduce democracy as a means of gaining consent from the working class, it is not inconceivable that the rights of company owners might begin to be questioned and eroded by workers imbued with a lively sense of the co-operative and collective nature of the enterprises in which they work, and to all intents and purposes, actually run, without much help from the boss!

Marx's idea that capitalism produces inside itself the seeds of its own destruction remains an immensely fertile notion. Capitalists have, once firmly established, been compelled to extend democratic rights to working people, and compelled to accept popular participation in the political management of society. Well-established Capitalist economies have also been compelled to concede relatively high standards of living to the great mass of workers. This has tended to contradict a number of Marx's important assumptions, and most certainly to weaken the appeal of Marxism.

The result has been the failure and signal defeat of the Marxist tradition. Marxists have relied upon repeated slumps, wars, and other disasters, to deliver the deathblow to the capitalist system. In this book Eagleton anticipates nuclear destruction and ecological mayhem with an almost indecent relish (235-7), because it is an unfortunate, and perhaps paradoxical consequence of the Marxist tradition, that revo-

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<sup>15</sup> See the discussion of the “commons” and the “multitude” in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001.

lutionary socialists should actually long for the severe economic and political disorders, which it is hoped might provide decisive opportunities for the revolutionary transformation of society. Unfortunately for Marxism it has been a tradition of longing to no avail; capitalism has barrelled along through one bloody catastrophe after another, introducing increasingly astonishing inventions and innovations, getting wealthier at every turn. Consequently, continuing to rely upon the opportunities provided by disintegration or implosion is not merely foolhardy it contradicts what we already know: socialism and enhanced social solidarity cannot be achieved in conditions of poverty and dislocation. As Eagleton points out:

“One of the problems with socialist revolutions is that they are most likely to break out in places where they are hardest to sustain. Lenin noted this irony in the case of the Bolshevik uprising. Men and women who are cruelly oppressed and semistarving may feel they have nothing to lose in making revolution. On the other hand, as we have seen, the backward conditions which drive them to revolt are the worst possible place to begin to build socialism.”  
(193)

Eagleton repeats this observation at a number of different places in this book, in a manner, which apparently contradicts his desire for socialist revolution, but this contradiction is only apparent because, of course, he hopes and ‘prays’ for revolutions in wealthy capitalist countries, rather than poor and wretched ones; and, he does this without paying due regard to the manifold ways in which the incorporation of the working class makes this eventuality highly unlikely, if not actually impossible.

Marx was right about a great many things because he was a close and rigorous observer of the society in which he lived, perpetually engaged in the struggle to work out how it actually functioned and worked. This remains the task for all those interested in strengthening social solidarity; we should not be drawn into sterile clarifications of what Marx really

meant, and, above all, we should not attempt to defend the wretched failures of Marxism and Marxism-Leninism. Instead, we need to search for the potential present within capitalism to raise demands and initiatives calculated to undermine progressively a system in which profit-seeking and private interests, rather than public interests and the rational allocation of resources, is allowed to prevail.

*Why Marx Was Right* is certainly worth reading, and much of what Eagleton has to say is interesting. Unfortunately he has become entangled with defending a tradition of failure, and this has spoiled his discussion of Marx's theoretical innovations and insights.