

BOOKS

THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE UNITED STATES LEFT

by John Bellamy Foster

Radical Political Economy Since the Sixties: A Sociology of Knowledge Analysis, by Paul Attewell. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1984. 306 pp., \$30.00.

Twenty years ago, when *Monopoly Capital* by Baran and Sweezy first appeared, there were only a handful of Marxian political economists in the U.S. But the escalating invasion of Vietnam, the popular resistance movement that grew up in response, and the worsening conditions of economic crisis that came with the winding down of the war changed all of that. By the mid-1970s radical political economy had grown into a vast and sprawling multi-disciplinary effort, cutting across the boundaries of economics, political science, sociology and history. Yet such rapid growth was not without its contradictions. Indeed, in the 1980s it seems clear that the "new political economy" of the U.S. left is torn by contradictory developments, while showing comparatively few signs at present of further development through contradiction.

The chief virtue of Paul Attewell's new book is that it provides us with a vantage point from which to view both the evolution of this new political economy, and what might be regarded as its current impasse. The main body of the book is structured around four themes: (1) theories of economic segmentation and poverty, (2) studies of the labor process, (3) economic crisis theory, and (4) inquiries into imperialism and dependency. In choosing these areas, Attewell acknowledges that he is neglecting "other

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important left-wing literatures," such as gender and political economy, class analysis, the theory of the state, radical history and critical perspectives on ideology and culture. Yet he insists that the topics he has chosen constitute the very core of the "discipline." Each of the four central chapters is then devoted to the two tasks of providing an account of developments in one of the selected areas, and examining that literature from the standpoint of the "sociology of knowledge," or "the analysis of a body of intellectual work in terms of the social context in which it was produced" (pp. 4-5). It is the latter task—although conceived in a manner that often seems unduly innocent, given the historical and epistemological complexities involved—which dominates the discussion in the opening and closing chapters, and forms the main organizing principle for the book as a whole.¹

Attewell therefore begins his study by constructing an ideal type of a left academic. Outwardly, the radical theorist is molded by and occupies a tenuous position within a university system in which mainstream ideas and methodology, by virtue of their connection with the power structure, are dominant at almost every turn. Inwardly, the style of thought that characterizes the left academic is shaped by the pursuit of the three contradictory goals of maintaining the Marxist paradigm, providing an analysis of contemporary events and presenting a moral indictment of capitalism.

In fact, it is the twofold tension that arises between paradigm maintenance and each of the other goals of analyzing contemporary events and producing a moral indictment of the system, that accounts for much of the preoccupation with periodization so characteristic of Marxist theory. In the physical sciences, Attewell explains—following the argument of Thomas Kuhn—anomalous phenomena which do not fit a particular paradigm are left to one side while "normal science" is pursued; until a new group of scientists launches a line of research aimed at the accumulated anomalies, thereby initiating a scientific revolution. In the social sciences, however, a different option is available: "the discovery of an anomaly in social science indicates not that present theoretical knowledge is *wrong* but merely that *reality has changed*" (p. 31). Applying this in a Marxist context he observes:

From Lenin on theorists have invoked the notion of a "new" or "higher" phase of capitalism to justify departure from the traditional analysis and introduction of new ideas. The most successful example is the now widely accepted formulation of capitalism

as monopolistic. By embracing the idea that monopoly is dominant in present-day capitalism, monopoly-capital theorists can ignore large sections of *Capital* (and its faults) while still remaining faithful Marxists (p. 31).

The designation of a new stage has also been used on occasion to justify the inclusion of a stronger moral indictment within Marxian political economy. Taking his lead from Alvin Gouldner, who had argued that a "context-free metaphor" of slavery constituted the "deep structure" of Marxian analysis, Attewell claims that the primary metaphor in modern Marxism is one of theft. Although Marx had rooted *Capital* in "a comparatively non-moralistic notion of *equal exchange*" and inveighed against those like Proudhon who claimed that "property is theft," contemporary Marxists frequently systemize blame by pointing to various departures from this norm of *quid pro quo*. Thus, noting the attack on "wastefulness, consumerism and dehumanization" in *Monopoly Capital*, Attewell states:

[A] major goal of most left theorizing is the *dual accomplishment* of a political economic analysis and a moral critique in which the economic analysis shows that an "evil" is systematically and necessarily produced by capitalism. Baran and Sweezy's efforts were a tour de force in this respect. Their ability to justify the shift in the analytic structure on the basis of a historical change in capitalism helped to rationalize the innovation to follow leftists (p. 36).

This is not to say that such work places "moral critique" before science, or that the emphasis on a monopoly stage is mere rationalization. "Indeed, its artfulness, lies in showing that if one accepts the economic analysis as scientifically correct, one cannot evade the moral conclusion, since it follows logically" (p. 36).

In contrast, the economic segmentation model presented an added moral indictment of the system without any clear connection to Marxian thought whatsoever. "The paradigm maintenance problem of segmentation theory, if it had one at all, was that the theory was isolated intellectually from mainstream Marxist theory" (p. 90). This approach had its origins in the work of a number of liberal institutionalists like Harvard's Michael Piore, who were dissatisfied with the dominant neoclassical interpretation of wage inequality and poverty as a simple reflection of differentials in skill levels within the population. The result was an alternative model

that pointed to the existence of a three-level labor market: (1) a dominant primary sector that was divided into both (a) an upper-tier of well-paid, non-routinized jobs, and (b) a lower-tier of fairly well-paid, routinized jobs; and (2) a subordinate secondary sector of poorly paid, non-routinized jobs. Moreover, these divisions within the labor market were said to be associated with three distinct class subcultures within the workforce: respectively middle class, working class, and lower class. A number of radical scholars pursuing graduate studies at Harvard during the 1960s—namely, David Gordon, Richard Edwards and Michael Reich—were involved in the early work on this model, and eventually gave it a more progressive cast by downplaying the strong “culture of poverty” implications, arguing instead that individuals acquired the attributes of particular class subcultures as a *result* of their structural positions—so that these attributes could not themselves be seen as the *causes* of poverty (p. 52).

Judged from a “sociology of knowledge” standpoint, Attewell tells us, the contributions of radicals to this literature reflect the external pressures imposed on left intellectuals trying to advance their careers within a liberal academy. The easiest strategy is to adopt a “social problems” orientation that concentrates on the worst features of the existing order. What is more, this can be done while utilizing the positivist methodology of the liberal tradition itself. The economic segmentation model proved ideally suited to this purpose. And yet, “Other than its efficacy as critique,” Attewell asks, “what was specifically Marxist about economic segmentation?” (p. 90).

The answer, if there was one, came only after the fact, as a result of the reemergence of radical work on the labor process. Most of the credit for the revival of interest in this area goes, of course, to Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). What is most significant about this contribution, for Attewell, is that it can be viewed as a direct continuation of Marx’s own theory; so that “little or no strain is apparent between the goal of explaining current events and that of paradigm maintenance” (p. 141). By arguing that Marx’s critique of the degradation of work during the nineteenth century also applied to the twentieth, Braverman managed to renew “a significant moral critique of capitalism” (p. 100). Nevertheless, Attewell makes it clear that he is “an admirer of Richard Edwards’ *Contested Terrain*” (p. 137).² It is this study, he contends, that linked the labor process to economic segmenta-

tion, and cleared the ground for what is termed "the grand synthesis" of Gordon, Edwards and Reich in *Segmented Work, Divided Workers* (1982).

In the early nineteenth century—according to Attewell's summary of Edwards—entrepreneurial control, or the supervision of work by the owner, was the dominant form of management. This was displaced in the late nineteenth century by hierarchical control which established a pyramid of authority within the firm. Following the "failure" of Taylorism—which, in sharp contrast to Braverman's analysis, is seen as a relatively minor and short-lived movement designed to rationalize hierarchical control by "buying off" certain workers—the twentieth century saw the transition from these simple systems of management to more sophisticated structural systems, like technical (or machine-dominated) control, and bureaucratic control (organization of work by means of detailed, written instructions and the creation of elaborate job ladders). Each of these modes of control is supposed to be dominant at a different phase of capitalist development, but the older ones nonetheless persist in certain industries. Thus it turns out that today's secondary labor market is linked to simple control systems, while the lower and upper tiers of the primary labor market are tied, respectively, to technical and bureaucratic control.

Despite the contrived nature of this scheme, Attewell considers it to be superior to Braverman's analysis, since it emphasizes the increasing differentiation rather than homogenization of the work force (although no empirical justification for giving preference to the former position is provided by Attewell) and opens the way for the larger project of Gordon, Edwards and Reich, in which all of modern U.S. history is seen in terms of the development of various "'social structures of accumulation'—institutional arrangements between labor and capital that encourage capital accumulation" (p. 130). In contrast, "Braverman's analysis of deskilling," he claims, "though trenchant as a critique, shows little or no promise for social change. . . . The fragmentation of tasks and the loss of the conceptual aspect of work would seem to leave little room for finding material bases of political awareness in the workplace" (p. 138). Attewell's criticism here, it should be noted, would apply to Marx just as much as Braverman, but completely misses its target in either case, since it merely presupposes that the "material bases of political awareness" are to be found in the retention

of control over “the conceptual aspect of work”—an axiom that runs counter to the whole analysis of the socialization of labor advanced by Marx and adhered to by most later Marxists.

The fourth chapter of *Radical Political Economy Since the Sixties*, dealing with Marxian crisis theory, begins with a useful review of the literature from the classical period to the present, which leads to the conclusion that major innovations in crisis theory have usually been generated by conflicts between paradigm maintenance and analysis of contemporary events. And since, where Marxian economics is concerned, historical facts that challenge the paradigm are most likely to be present in a boom, “it took the anomaly of extended postwar expansion,” Attewell informs us, “to provoke new approaches, such as Baran and Sweezy’s *Monopoly Capital* and Mandel’s *Late Capitalism*” (p. 258).

But the external, career-based pressures on radical intellectuals also have an effect on studies of economic crisis. Because of their precarious positions vis-à-vis employment, tenure, etc., radicals have an interest in demonstrating the appropriateness of Marxian theory according to accepted academic criteria. Crisis theory thus becomes a means to this end, and radical economists end up trying to prove that “Marxism is *more scientific*; ideological conservatism prevents the neoclassical orthodoxy from admitting the systematicity of crisis” (p. 205). This leads in some cases to an unqualified endorsement of empirical inquiry as a means of legitimation. “In such a context,” Attewell states,

the relative emphasis between maintaining the Marxist paradigm and explaining unfolding events shifts to the latter. The work of American crisis theorists is theoretically eclectic, empirically detailed, and directly oriented towards professional peers, especially as an attack on orthodox economics (pp. 205-06).

Hence, it is scarcely surprising—although Attewell himself does not actually connect his insights in these areas—that certain radical theorists should have their vision so distorted by their empirical/empiricist investigations (as mediated by liberal institutions, ideas and methodology) that both the major lessons of Marxian theory and the main drift of history itself are lost sight of. As an example one can point to the now common criticism of *Monopoly Capital* for treating the post-Second World War boom as an *exception*. Summarizing the objections raised in a 1976 article by Raford Boddy and James Crotty, Attewell indicates that these theorists:

expressed their dissatisfaction with the underconsumptionist view of post-World War economic expansion. Since underconsumptionism views capitalism as essentially stagnant, it is forced to regard the postwar boom as exceptional, the result largely of wars and epoch-making innovations. In contrast, Boddy and Crotty wish to portray monopoly capitalism as expansionist and dynamic, though they grant Baran and Sweezy's point that for much of the postwar era... the empirical reality seemed to conform with stagnation theory (p. 185).³

That such criticisms should be advanced and even gain considerable influence during a period of renewed stagnation would seem to require some further response from a theorist like Atwell concerned with the "sociology of knowledge." Such a response is not forthcoming, however. And thus the reader is left to sort the matter out as best he or she can. Although it is true that Baran and Sweezy constructed their analysis to explain the anomaly of the post-Second World War boom (i.e., why stagnation had been held off and yet was still endemic to the economy), and would therefore seem to be vulnerable to the criticism that the period of prosperity was treated as an exception, the history of the last two decades, when coupled with what we know of monopoly capitalism during the first four decades of the century, does appear to reinforce the idea that stagnation has been the underlying reality of the modern economy, and that the 1948-69 period actually was an exception in this respect—one that can be explained in terms of special historical circumstances. The importance of pondering the phrase "Omnis determinatio est negatio" is just as great today as it was in the days of Hegel or Marx.⁴ Furthermore, the above example should awaken one to the fact that losing sight of the forest for the trees is a natural counterpart of the kind of analysis that is both "empirically detailed" and "theoretically eclectic."

Going on to echo a criticism that has been prevalent in Western Marxist discussions of imperialism in recent years, Atwell contends, in his chapter on that subject, that moral indictment overwhelmed paradigm maintenance in the new dependency, unequal exchange, and world system theories, which, while supposedly attempting to demonstrate that imperialism is theft, adopted positions that were "logically incompatible" with the classical Marxist approach to value and exploitation. The point is made most explicit in relation to *The Political Economy of Growth*:

Paul Baran's (1957) contribution to this [underdevelopment] theory advanced the moral critique of imperialism by showing how the West appropriated the Third World's economic surplus. To do so, however, he had to define "surplus" in ways incompatible with orthodox Marxist theory. He did violence to the traditional framework in order to ground his new critique (p. 34).

This argument illustrates some of the confusions to which Western Marxist discussions of imperialism have fallen prey in recent years. Attewell's contention that Baran did "violence" to the original Marxist framework is based on the latter's substitution of the economic surplus concept for Marx's surplus value. But this did not constitute a break with the classical paradigm, if only because Marx himself had studiously avoided applying the surplus value category (as opposed to surplus product) to third world conditions, where the capitalist mode of production does not exist in its "pure" form. Moreover, Baran was motivated not by a desire to construct a stronger moral critique, but by the need to uncover the full magnitude of the social accumulation fund potentially available for development, through an analysis of the class forms governing its appropriation and utilization, in order to demonstrate the real imperative of revolutionary transformation in dependent societies. As he explained in a letter to Sweezy: "In addition to what imperialism does, one should consider and indeed emphasize what its role is in the prevention of what needs to be done."⁵

Here we find the main weakness of Attewell's own book, which—despite all the talk about periodization—tends to see "orthodox Marxism" as a static paradigm to which later theorists do "violence" by forcing in anomalous facts and incompatible moral critiques. Against this view there is another: "orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*," and Marxism, like history itself, develops only through contradictions imposed by social practice.⁶

NOTES

1. For a discussion of problems associated with the "sociology of knowledge" see Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), pp. 456-88.
2. Richard Edwards, *Contested Terrain* (New York: Basic Books, 1979). For a critique of this work see Jules Geller and Steve Diamond, "Forms of Capitalist Control Over the Labor Process," *Monthly Review* (vol. 31, No. 7, December 1979), pp. 39-53.
3. See Raford Boddy and James Crotty, "Stagnation, Instability and International Competition," *American Economic Review, Papers and Pro-*

- ceedings (vol. 66, No. 2, May 1976), pp. 27-33. Although not denying the existence of stagnation in the 1970s altogether, Boddy and Crotty saw it as the result of the deliberate imposition of governmental restraints on what was essentially an overly dynamic macroeconomy.
4. "Every determination is at the same time a negation." This statement by Spinoza became one of the central principles of Hegel's *Logic*. See Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 209-10, 229-39. Also Friedrich Engels, *Anti-Duhring* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 169.
 5. Quoted in Paul M. Sweezy, "Obstacles to Economic Development," in C. H. Feinstein, ed. *Socialism, Capitalism and Economic Growth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 191. See also John Bellamy Foster, *The Theory of Monopoly Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1986), pp. 27-33, 160-92; Victor D. Lippit, "The Concept of Surplus in Economic Development," *Review of Radical Political Economics* (vol. 17, Nos. 1 and 2, Spring and Summer 1985), pp. 1-19.
 6. George Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), p. 1.

We are in need of unhampered growth out of old traditions and habits. The movement for women's emancipation has so far made but the first step in that direction. It is to be hoped that it will gather strength to make another. The right to vote, or equal civil rights, may be good demands, but true emancipation begins neither at the polls nor in the courts. It begins in woman's soul. History tells us that every oppressed class gained true liberation from its masters through its own efforts. It is necessary that woman learn that lesson, that she realize that her freedom will reach as far as her power to achieve her freedom reaches.

—Emma Goldman, 1911