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***The Charmed Circle of Ideology: A Critique of Laclau and Mouffe,
Butler and Žižek* by Geoff Boucher**

Review by Paul Reynolds¹

This work critically maps, for the first time, the tendency of postmarxism defined by the political strategy of radical democracy, from its inception in HSS to its formulation as a distinct tendency in CHU. No previous study presents the combined work of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek as a distinct political tendency and in the light of their total theoretical production. (Boucher 2008, p. 3)

This is a difficult, contradictory and sometimes puzzling text. Boucher's uneven and uneasy balance of polemical flourish and dense articulation – an adaptation of a PhD thesis, apparently submitted successfully in 2004 but not published until 2008 – argues that “.....By critically mapping the political trajectory of post-Marxian discourse theory, it seeks to radicalize post-Marxist discourse theories towards a post-modern Marxism” (pp. 3-4). In doing so, he engages in substantial critical studies of Butler, Laclau and Mouffe and Žižek, tracing the development of a post-Marxian political project from *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (HSS) to *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality* (CHU).

Boucher has a particular starting point - the first sentence of his introduction is -“Marxism is at the nadir of its fortunes” (p. 1) – and a particular end point – that post-Marxism becomes captured in its ‘charmed circle of ideology’ by its failure to demarcate the social and the political from the ideological. In different post-Marxist retreats from Marxism’s foundational ontologies, Ideology occupies the space where ontological content has withered or is absent, within which post-Marxist theory and politics are captured and limited, regardless of its protagonists distinctive and different appeals to radical democracy, performativity or the Lacanian infused subject. In each of his three cases, Boucher seeks to emphasize how, set apart from the universalisms imposed by Marxism, post-Marxist constitutions of the contingent subject collapse in upon themselves, rooted in what is claimed to be a common historicist problematic.

The problem he explores is one widely recognized in critical debate within Marxist and post-Marxist (as well as modernist and post-modernist) theory since the ‘cultural turn’ and the post-structuralist assault on the philosophical foundations of

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modern theorising of society and social development. Habermas famously laid bare the logical contradiction in Foucault's trenchant anti-essentialist claims for social life and raised the issue of the conditionality of truth and discourse in post-structuralist thinking (1987, p. 279, *passim*). Most succinctly, McLennans' (1996) critique of Barrett (1991) on the politics of truth provided a rejection of the conditional tendencies that post-structuralism inculcated in social theory and a defence of modernist thinking. Post-structuralists are generally concerned to theorise the subject and their social and political context emptied of what it regards as static instantiations and external determinations of the political subject - reductions, functions, structuring agents, essences and universals. Instead, the subject and their context are conditionally and contingently formed or self-forming within a terrain constructed of discourse. The conditionality of each given conjuncture and moment that the subject occupies allows possible releases and possibilities from previously structurally drawn constraints. Hence different post-Marxist thinkers were able to 're-theorise' oppression, exploitation and alienation as no longer seemingly closed by the inescapable grip of ideology – particularly the concept of ideology utilized in Althusser's (1989) discussion of ideological state apparatus- where structuralist domination seemed all pervasive. For post-Marxists, the particular sins of modern theorizing are encapsulated in the determinations inherent in the materialist conception of history, the primacy of class and the centrality of the capitalist mode of production in the organization of social life (though its manifestation in particular conjunctures is not questioned). It is these features that lay behind an all pervasive concept of ideology. Their absence or deconstruction provides the discursive space and potential for eruptions of subjectivity beyond what is interpellated of constituted by social forces.

This is the terrain that Boucher seeks to occupy in critically assessing the work of leading post-Marxists, and particularly the emergence of what he sees as a coherent political project in the form of radical democracy. For Boucher, this attempt to maintain the spirit of radicalism devoid of the discredited science of Marxism is flawed because:

the political strategy of radical democracy, is governed by the historicist problematic, which acts as a theoretical unconscious limiting the ability of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek to think social complexity and radical strategy... the historicist problematic is characterized by five key positions: the relativisation of theory, the foundational character of ideology, the expressive conception of history, an identical subject-object and a theory of social practice modelled on individual praxis. (Boucher 2008, p. 234)

Boucher recognizes that a consequence of these conceptual failings is have political ramifications of radical democracy, such as the issues of exclusion and the exercise of regulating power in governance, whilst it can often be seen to promise little more than a more cosmopolitan liberal or social democracy. His main concern, however, is to intervene at the philosophical level to show the underlying flaws in post-Marxist thinking.

His alternative to this failure of radicalism is..... interesting. According to the outside cover of the book, Boucher ‘points to ‘intersubjectivity’ as an exit from postmarxist theory’s charmed circle of ideology’, except that inter-subjectivity only appears briefly in his criticisms of his readings of Butler and Zizek. Boucher’s real plea is for an alternative to post-Marxism composed of an Althusserian and Poulantzian influenced ‘Regulation Theory, neo-Marxist sociology and leftwing Eurocommunism’ (p. 39). Regulation theory is cited as his alternative, but interesting in his 6th footnote of Chapter 1, he acknowledges that he is principally informed by Aglietta’s seminal text (1979) and Boyer’s introductory study (1990) with some reference to Jessop and Lipietz and a name check for Brenner as a critic (p. 46). What is remarkable - given that he returns to regulation theory in his conclusion, suggesting an alternative agenda for theoretical research - is that nowhere is there a sustained discussion of how regulation theory contradicts the ‘distinct political tendency’ that is the subject of the book and an elaboration of this alternative as a theoretical schema and political project. Indeed regulation theory appears mainly as an asserted alternative to Laclau and Mouffe’s radical democracy, with too little elaboration and theoretical exposition as to how regulation theory provides a trenchant critique of post-Marxism. Neo-Marxist sociology and leftwing Eurocommunism are similarly absent, the latter again referred to briefly in a critical discussion of Laclau and Mouffe.

Boucher’s own political and conceptual position – or at least one he has subscribed to and held - is more directly stated on the website <http://www.ethicalpolitics.org/> and particularly their Blackwood Project of 2002 - <http://home.mira.net/~andy/blackwood/tep.htm>, authored with Andy Blunden and others. This grouping asserts that ethical politics is ‘a cultural politics of the contestation of universality’:

Capacities and subjectivity are shaped with reference to forms of universality (the internalisation of norms of conduct, not only as forms of competence, but also as conscious ethical frameworks and moral standards). Without a morality, there is no subject and therefore no social practice. This is because social practices are materially bounded but open-ended, and social agents (while not the creative and completely conscious agents of Giddens’ theoretical fantasia) are never robots or cultural dupes. Social agents therefore require a combination of flexible innovation with self-limiting restrictions: the name for this is the conscious ego with a moral conscience and the theory of the formalisation of morals is ethics. From the Left, ethical politics involves challenging the non-inclusive nature of the dominant universal values (expanding the framework of universality) and demanding that universal values affirmed by the hegemonic alliance be adhered to in practice (confronting capitalism with its own ethical norms). It means the materialist critique of bourgeois ethics by locating the field of bourgeois ethics in concrete social relations and the institutional framework of capitalist society. This is designed to articulate radical ethics, not as some new morality sucked out of a professor’s thumb or scribbled on the back of a leaflet, but as the transformation of bourgeois ethics. This is not their negation for a political

instrumentalism where power is its own justification, nor an equally instrumental concept of the dialectic of revolutionary ends and means (which leaves the ethical status of the socialist revolution a prisoner of the mythology of historical necessity). It means developing social practices that connect with the radical criticism of bourgeois ethics. (Boucher <http://ethicalpolitics.org/geoff-boucher/2001/theses.htm>)

This is worth quoting at length because it gives some insight into what Boucher's might regard as an alternative project to that of post-Marxism. The problem appears to be, albeit based on a reading of this short text, that a notion of ethics seems to permeate and occupy the space where Marxists might put a politics of class and post-Marxists, under Boucher's critique, a concept of ideology. Equally, it seems that this ethical politics occupies the space between 'universals' and the subject in a way that is open both to a practice based – performative? – politics that is able to expose 'bourgeois ethic's, and to speaking to truth through and against universals that seems both constituted by and accessible through ethics. Is Boucher solving the problem or simply changing its conceptual basis? It is difficult to say, and perhaps unfair to set this short political writing against his larger theoretical corpus. Nevertheless, it does contribute to a lack of clarity as to where Boucher's critical project takes us.

If the devil is in the detail, there are additional concerns about Boucher's study. Footnote 1 gives an unsettling caveat to his claim to map and explore the 'total theoretical production' of Laclau and Mouffe, Butler and Žižek from HSS to CHU (so at least up to 2000). The footnote is a long caveat as to the other relevant thinkers who are then largely neglected in the text, such as David Howarth and Simon Critchley, and the limited focus of his examination of his principal theorists beyond texts dealing with post-Marxian radical democracy, and (whose ideas in any case have developed and matured since 2000). This includes selective engagement with their theoretical oeuvre, for example with queer theory, whilst acknowledging its importance in Butler's work. This presents a problem when we come to his critical discussions of in his three main chapters: the selectivity of Boucher's focus leads to selective readings of the thinkers. Boucher wants to read them as all directly caught within a Althusserian problematic in reading ideology and discourse, which may be one feature of the problems a critical engagement with their thinking engenders. Yet looking at Butler, failing to read her within the context of her Hegelian roots in *Subjects of Desire* and her subsequent tortured engagement with the relationship between discourse and embodiment in her queer theory texts leads to only a partial sense of what Butler's project is. It is not that Boucher does not recognize the Hegelianism in Butler's early PHD publication – he cites in on page 132 – or the issues raised by her queer theory as he gives brief space to reviewing her debate with Nancy Fraser. It is that he seeks to collapse rich, sometimes inconsistent, sometimes contradictory and sometimes critically reflective bodies of work into a particular – albeit critical – focus and concern.

An additional weakness might be found in his tendency, against this reading, to seek to cover every nuance of each thinkers analyses, 'name checking' philosophical antecedents and diverse influences in a way that gives an authoritative

feel to the text, yet is undermined by the selectivity and inconsistency of his analysis. Whilst he understandably wants to focus principally on the post-Marxist political discourse of his principals, his attempt to be encyclopedic in his criticisms of them yet selective in his reading leaves him open to challenge by those who see the individual thinkers through a focus on their whole oeuvre (an example would be Wozniak 2009). I want to confine myself to four sets of concerns about Boucher's discussion in drawing this review towards a close. The first two are his easy dismissal of Marxism and his characterization of post-Marxism. He adopts the now standard if dated critique of Marxism as humbled by insufficient grasp of social complexity, a failure to answer anti-essential post-structural critiques, the changed contexts of globalization, social movement and identity politics and the power of neo-liberal and conservative hegemonies. Marxism is fettered by 'the proletariat as the incarnation of universality', claims for historical necessity and 'a rational mastery of society' characterized by a socialist order without the need for politics (p. 2).

Boucher establishes relatively early that 'postmarxism in its emergent state remains in a negative dependency on Marxism' (p. 7), and specifically its Althusserian roots. This is certainly one reading of post-Marxism, and Althusser is a critical influence in thinking the ruptures between Marxist, post-Marxist and neo-Marxist thinking. Yet, post-Marxism is an elusive idea with various overlapping meanings. For Goldstein (2005, p. 2) it is post-structuralist Marxism, directly derived from Althusserian and Foucauldian reconceptualisations of radical thinking within the plurality and diversity of discourses and relations in constituting conditions and subjects of oppression and liberation, celebrated in the articulations of Laclau, Mouffe, Butler and others. Therborn's (2008) survey begins with a long and thorough analysis of the transformations of 21st Century global politics as a context for post-Marxist development, before identifying Marxism within a dialectics of modernity and what follows within the tradition of critical theory. His survey of what might be regarded as post-Marxism is contextualized deliberately in the context of the range of left responses within the Northern Hemisphere, signalling the diversity and difference within different currents of thinking. In his broad survey, post-Marxism is acknowledged as a label accepted by Laclau and Mouffe, but ranging from Habermas to Debray to Bauman, before identifying neo-Marxisms ranging from Zizek to Hardt and Negri to Badiou to the politically committed to Marxist politics such as Callinicos (pp. 130-181). This would suggest, as a caution to Boucher, that the post-Marxist 'genre' is difficult to encapsulate into a project (and not as moribund as he suggests). Indeed, elsewhere I have taken an alternative position - similar to Geras (1987) and Tormey and Townsend (2006) - where post-Marxism is best described not by what it purports, but what is absent:

Post-Marxism is a heterogeneous diffusion of radical pluralist, democratic and identity politics, politics of social divisions other than class and post-structuralist and post-modern rejections of grand theory and social schema. What it has in common is a habitual rejection of one or more principal characteristic of Marxist theory: the materialist conception of history; dialectics as social dynamic and method; class and the mode of production as principal,

organising and features of human societies; capitalism and class politics as grand narratives in the development of modern societies; and the notion of a single scientific analysis which yielded insights beyond subjective position (Reynolds 2000, p. 260).

Boucher's post-Marxism is particular and selective, and fails to recognize a richer sense in which in which post-Marxism resists reduction to simply a perceived common political project of radical democracy. Sim (1998) cautions against such a reading in distinguishing *post-Marxism* and *post-Marxism* and further between post-Marxism and anti-Marxism, as well as recognising the particular import of feminist critiques, whilst Goldstein's (2005), who has a similar focus on Althusser, nevertheless sees the importance of including the work of Macherey and Frow in suggesting post-Marxism is an altogether more complex and diverse articulation of political, cultural, economic and theoretical/philosophical engagements, both post-Althusserian and in some important senses pre-Althusserian, in the work of Adorno, Marcuse and the critical tradition, and before that in the applications of Marxist philosophy implicit in Leninism and Trotskyism. In the matter of when Marxism, if at any point it can be seen as a definitive construct rather than a living, dialectically developing construct, post-Marxism might be traced back to Marx himself. Not for nothing, in the context of a political disagreement with French Marxists led by Jean Guesde and his son in law Paul Lafargue over political strategy, did Marx remark "ce qu'il y a de certain c'est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste" ("what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist") (a remark cited by Engels in his letter to Bernstein of 2-3 November 1882).

Post-Marxism does have definite political articulations, many coalesced around a notion of radical democracy. However, Boucher's critique does not choose to identify its main currents, intellectual foundations and consequences. He instead, and perhaps unwisely, tries to collapse philosophical and political debate about what he regards as signal thinkers within post-Marxism, which leads to an unsatisfying unevenness in the analysis.

At the same time, Therborn (2008) provides the caution that Marxism is by no means as exhausted as Boucher's dismissal suggests. Indeed regulation theory, whilst not located within the traditional corpus of Marxism, is one productive way forward. Another is critical realism, which given Boucher's concerns might have been expected to have occupied some considerable space in his analysis, but is mainly dispensed with in one footnote – footnote 6 of the introduction on page 14 – and mainly in respect of the somewhat eccentric Bhaskar rather than more critical work such as that of Brown, Fleetwood and Roberts (2001) and Joseph (2007), and Creaven's (2007) Emergentist Marxism. It is also worth outlining a growing critical literature that seeks to retrieve Gramsci from its 'eurocommunist' reading and Laclau and Mouffe (see Lester 2000, Morton 2007, and more recently Thomas 2009). Interestingly, Boucher at one point claims the need for a post-modern Marx yet does not recognize attempts at such a Marxism by Resnick and Wolff (2001, 2006) and the grouping around the journal '*Rethinking Marxism*' or Carver (1998)

This is not to say these theoretical engagements are not subject to criticism, nor that they map onto easy political strategies, but they, along with those Therborn maps, seem to represent a vibrant resurgent interest and engagement in Marxist theory and Marxist politics that might have benefitted Boucher's project. Of course, Boucher can legitimately point to the scope of his enquiry as 2000, but perhaps the theoretical and political developments of the period between 2000 and 2008 might signify that times have changed sufficiently for Marxism to be worth some reflection and post-Marxism to be a subject not easily squeezed into a particular problematic in the way Boucher attempts.

Whilst qualifying the current state of the terrain, it is also worth noting, on Boucher's starting point of Althusser, that whilst Althusser's writings on Ideological State Apparatus undoubtedly had a significant impact on post-Marxist thinking, particularly that of Laclau, more recent Althusserian scholarship (Elliot 1987, revised 2006, Suchting 2004) has suggested a greater complexity to Althusser's thinking, particularly in his writings on Aleatory Marxism. This speaks to my third concern, which is that Boucher's reading of Althusser, as well as his readings of Butler, Laclau and Mouffe and Zizek is selective for the purpose of pursuing this particular analysis. There is nothing inherently problematic about selectivity, but a more reflective, judicious and self-critical tone as opposed to one purporting to prove his analysis, might have made the work more palatable.

Finally, there is also a question-mark over Boucher's assumption as to what *CHU* represents. As already observed, Boucher sets out his study with the observation that he is mapping 'the tendency of postmarxism defined by the political strategy of radical democracy, from its inception in *HSS* to its formulation as a distinct tendency in *CHU*' (p. 3). Yet *CHU* starts with a rather different acknowledgement of the status of *CHU*: '[CHU] ...seeks to establish the common trajectory of our thoughts and to stage in a productive way the different intellectual commitments that we have' (Butler, Laclau and Zizek 2000 p. 1). The remainder of the introduction provides a concise summary of where they see their conjoining and also of the significant and serious differences in theoretical positions between them. Whereas Boucher lists their chapter titles in *CHU* in arguing that they underline a common sense of requiring a rethink in the context of their struggles with universality within a historicist intellectual context (p. 233), a different reading of *CHU* might take a different view. Whilst the political project of radical democracy is undoubtedly of interest – and constitutes a political commitment – by the contributors of *CHU*, it becomes clear that the divergences between them are critical, and that notwithstanding a historicist critique, those divergences might have played a more prominent part in Boucher's analysis. Whilst any recourse to broad concepts of universality or historicism necessarily operates at a broad level of abstraction, it is nevertheless necessary to engage their manifestations in particular authors or theories in a way that does not make their reading too selective. A feature of this, in reading about the 'charmed circle of ideology' is that ideology seems both all-pervasive and flat, rather than nuanced and layered in its determinations, interpellations and spaces for rupture (or contradictions). There is neither a long discussion of the concept of ideology and its nuanced relationship to hegemony, nor a discussion of the relationship between ideology and discourse (see,

for example, Dant 1991). Looking at these, and their different articulations in the writings of Butler, Laclau and Mouffe and Zizek would have a useful starting point and perhaps signalled a rethinking of approach.

What Boucher provides then, is a rather dense and singular reading of post-Marxism, selectively understood through post-structuralist influenced thinkers traced back to problems in Althusserian Marxism's theory of ideology in ideological state apparatus. It is insufficiently connected to the alternatives he has in mind, and the discussion is insufficiently developed and fails to critically engage with key contemporary development, or demark its limitations, within the context of recent Marxist and post-Marxist scholarship. That said, it would be unfair to conclude without noting that the text shows scholarship, a committed reading, a polemical flourish (which might be not best suited for this work) and some interesting critical ideas. It is also fair to say that it is easy to mount such a criticism with hindsight, that this study would certainly seem to adopt a useful approach and that the author could not be prescient of some of the recent literature cited here (although most is before the publication of this text in December 2008). It is possible to speculate that this is the publication form of a study with perhaps different priorities and focus in its inception that represents an uneven packaging of some interesting insights with some less critical and defensible positions. The conclusion the reader comes to is that Boucher probably has some very important and insightful things to say about post-Marxism and about the reconstitution of a socialist theory and politics, but this text is not an effective vehicle.

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