

Reviews

Unnithan-Kumar, Maya.

1997. *Identity, Gender and Poverty in Rajasthan*. Providence, RI: Berghahn Books.

Van Schendel, Willem.

1995. *Invention of Jummas: State Formation and Ethnicity in Eastern Bangladesh*. In RH Barnes, Andrew Grey and Benedict Kingsbury, eds., *Indigenous Peoples of Asia*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, Association for Asian Studies Monograph No. 48.

1. The term *adivasi* or original inhabitant rather than 'tribal' is seen as preferable by some writers for it is free of the evolutionist implications of the latter term.
2. In dealing with his evidence here, the lack of chronological sequence is irritating to the reader. When Guha talks of adaptation of forest communities, nineteenth century evidence for the Bhils is cited alongside data from the first millennium. Clearly such a handling of the obviously rich material, does not allow for the specificities of the historical conjuncture of the nineteenth century, for example in eastern India, where the discourse of marginality forcefully articulated the history of the region as one in which the local inhabitants of Chotanagpur were gradually peripheralised in regional politics and subject to the whims of the colonial state.
3. In neighbouring Rajasthan, Maya Unnithan's work on the Girasia tribes shows, that while the marginalisation of these groups is of recent origin for in their oral narratives they record themselves as being Rajput, their current status is a tragic story of gradual dispossession and resettlement on unproductive lands. See Unnithan-Kumar (1997).
4. See also Abdul R., Jan Mohammed and David Lloyd, *Cultural critique*, Fall 1987.

Marxism, Revisionism, and Leninism: Explication, Assessment, and Commentary, by Richard F. Hamilton, Westport, CT: Praeger (2000), x, 269 pp.

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In a very timely book, Richard Hamilton has attempted to revisit the empirical claims of Marxism, Revisionism (in particular, the "evolutionary socialism" of Eduard Bernstein), and Leninism. With the crumbling of the Berlin Wall--symbolizing for many the end of the relevance of Marx's political theory--and the veering toward a "third way" (read, neo-liberal way) in various Western European countries by formerly avowed socialist parties, Marxism, and its brand of socialism, is now universally assumed to be an historical artifact, and maybe neither a very interesting nor productive one at that. If we were to look at the proclivities of theorizing within the social sciences and humanities, we would not see much that would point to Marxism's conceptual centrality either. Instead of finding the specter of Marx haunting the halls of academe, we are more prone to confront various hagiographic personifications of J. S. Mill, Michel Foucault, and Gayatri Spivak. So, in such a context, it might actually be fruitful to once again look at the theoretical and empirical relevance of Marx's thought so as to assess whether his absence in conceptual and practical affairs is warranted. Hamilton, coming from a rather different problematic (one that sees Marx and his heirs behind every theoretical and conceptual corner), steps up to offer one take on this issue.

In general, Hamilton attempts to verify and/or falsify what he sees as the empirical hypotheses of these three strains of the Marxist tradition. What makes the book significant is his attempt to clearly articulate the empirical

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propositions of each of these positions, and to then attempt to bring the most recent comparative statistical and empirical evidence to bear on such propositions. To my knowledge, there is no other study that analyses these positions so tenaciously as empirical theories, and which, with remarkable attention to interdisciplinary empirical sources, attempts to see how they fair with reality.

Before Hamilton looks specifically at these three positions, he first historically recreates the tenets associated with liberalism. This is done for two reasons, one clearly expressed, the other only coming out later in his argument. First, Hamilton notes correctly that the Marxist tradition arose partially in reaction to the ideology and practices of classical liberalism. Thus, it seems sensible to look at the nature and success of liberalism in order to better characterize the positions of Marxism, Revisionism, and Leninism. Second, Hamilton attempts to do a bit of prior retrieval in the face of such later critiques. That is, his discussion clearly argues that liberalism has lived up to its earlier empirical claims, particularly, that the implementation of liberal-inspired policies will lead to the greater welfare of human beings. What is interesting is that Hamilton only really emphasizes the first point, and while he reiterates the way in which Marxism is a reaction to this potent ideology he never actually clearly articulates the differences, nor does he clearly point out the way that Marxism is defined in reaction to liberalism. More important, I think, is the implicit argument (one that only comes to the fore after his empirical analyses of the Marxist tradition) that liberalism has fared much better than Marxism in terms of its empirical verification. In this early context, Hamilton is unerring in his support of liberalism, and when he does discuss the recurring criticisms of liberalism (and capitalism) he is quick to banish them to a nineteenth century form of Ludditism: "Much of the denigration is caricature, much of it 'poorly researched.' The mills, for example, were not dark; they had giant windows to bring in the light. How else could one see the work? . . . Would critics have stopped the industrial revolution so as to save the English countryside?" (p. 26).

Leaving aside the empirical veracity of such a claim concerning the design of mills, it is clear that Hamilton has no patience for the Charles Dickens of England, not to mention the many working class activists from the early 19th century onward who clearly portrayed the "denigration" (caricatured or not) that the capitalist system was imposing on their lives. And, as has been confirmed by many historical studies of nineteenth-century working class activism in England (see, for example, Thompson 1963; Neale 1972; Morris 1979; Rothstein 1983; Royle 1986), many of these critiques arose from the very tenets of liberalism (Locke's "labor" theory of property rights was invoked by many working class activists -- like the Chartist, Bronterre O'Brien in 1833 -- to argue against the rapacious capitalist appropriation of the working classes' "fruits of their labor"). More important, from an historical point of view at least, is that within working class culture you could not separate liberal ideals from the socialist claims that began to surface in the 1840s. At any rate, none of these well-documented developments in working class ideology (prior, it must be noted, to Marx's arrival on the socialist scene) are dealt with by Hamilton, and one can only conjecture that he wishes to preserve the sanctity of liberalism from the ravages of working class liberal and socialist critiques alike.

Following his discussion of liberalism, Hamilton gets down to the analytical task at hand. After empirically testing each Marxist position in separate chapters, Hamilton argues that Marxism and Leninism fare rather badly, while Revisionism does well. Hamilton then goes on to ask why Marxism and Leninism, given their supposed poor empirical veracity, still dominate intellectual and political life. Leaving aside whether Hamilton has accurately characterized their hegemonic presence within academia (one indeed wonders whether such a characterization made more sense 30 years ago, if even then), he proffers that their resilience must be due to extra-intellectual factors, that is, to individual psychological issues (the need to "bond" with theories that have served an individual well), social psychological issues (the need to conform to the position of one's peers), and organizational factors (the way in which intellectual work has become entrapped within separate disciplines, and thus those still clinging to the tenets of the Marxist tradition have not had access to studies that disconfirm its claims) (pp. 209-214). After covering these particular extra-intellectual reasons for the dominance of the Marxist tradition, Hamilton ends his book by calling for more open theories that are willing to be eclectic (meaning, non-Marxist) and more attune to empirical realities. While I find Hamilton's analysis of the Marxist tradition to be enlightening in its marshalling of comparative empirical work, and necessary in its intended goals, I also see a number of issues for concern. I wish to look at these in more detail in the rest of my review. In so doing, I will limit my comments primarily to his treatment of Marxism, though the implications of my concerns here might easily bear on his analyses of Revisionism and Leninism as well.

As may seem apparent, Hamilton is assuming a particular position on theoretical validity: a theory is valid if and only if it corresponds to empirical evidence. "Put differently," Hamilton argues, "we assume that the elements of such a theory will 'reflect' available evidence drawn from the societies being described and analyzed" (p. 5). However commonsensical such a position may be (and, moreover, however seemingly associated with some of Marx's stated intentions it may be), Hamilton begs the question that this is the best way to assess the validity of these positions. But, even if we were to accept this generally positivistic approach to theory relevancy, the way that

Hamilton articulates the basic assumptions associated with each position, and lays out what he considers to be the relevant empirical data, unfortunately undermines his attempt to be objective and free from “whim, fancy, tendency, Zeitgeist, personal charisma, special interest, or prejudice” (p. 7). To truly test a theory in this way, one must make sure of the following: first, that one has accurately articulated the totality of that theory in testable hypotheses; second, that one has accurately articulated all of the empirical evidence that bears on these hypotheses. Unfortunately, the reader is not sure either of these practices has occurred sufficiently to make his later claims concerning the moribund nature of the Marxist tradition.

For example, in Chapter 2, entitled, “Marxism,” Hamilton makes the rather quick-handed assumption that the totality of Marx’s theory can be gleaned from *The Communist Manifesto*, a work written very early on in Marx’s career, and one moreover written with the intention of motivating political action. While Hamilton recognizes this potential problem, he is quick to note that, in later Prefaces to this work, Marx and Engels still argue for the currency of its tenets (p. 38). Of course, in saying this, they were not referring to the centrality and importance of this work for characterizing Marxism *per se* (both Marx and Engels gave such an accolade to *Capital*), but to its role as a tendential outline of economic and political developments, and, importantly, as a political work. But, even leaving that aside, why focus on this work rather than the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* or *Capital*? Part of the reason, it seems, is the facility with which the *Communist Manifesto*, given its schematic form, can offer testable predictions, particularly those related to economic crises, the immiseration of the proletariat, the increased organizational and ideological aggregation of the working class, and, most importantly for Hamilton, the inevitability of proletarian revolution. While Hamilton marshals evidence to show that none of these particular theses have been confirmed within Western capitalist countries, his evidence is rather sparse at times and only takes into consideration work that clearly supports his overall position. In particular, Hamilton avoids citing and discussing Marxist and non-Marxist political economists who have spent decades confirming the continued relevance of many of these tenets, with just as much empirical tenacity as the economic historians he seems to favor. Moreover, when he does mention the claims of recent popular authors (John Cassidy in *The New Yorker* and Steven Marcus in the *New York Times Book Review*) concerning how the *Communist Manifesto* has clearly predicted the current conditions of economic globalization, he is quick to note that these are rather “commonplace” predictions related to a “patently obvious reality,” one that any conscious capitalist in the 19th century would have articulated (p. 215). At this point, it becomes painfully obvious that Hamilton will only allow the consideration of Marx’s predictions that fit within his overall plan to discredit Marxism.

If there are clear examples of Hamilton’s problems in terms of his stated methodological position, there are also concerns about whether his very methodological approach is the best way to actually deal with the validity of Marxism. And, in reflecting on this concern, it becomes clear why he chose the *Communist Manifesto* for his characterization of Marxism tout court. From a positivist position, of course, the only theory that is relevant is that which can be clearly, and rather schematically, articulated in concise predictive claims that point to antecedent causes and their later effects, all of which can be clearly related to empirical evidence. Any theory that eschews such clear-cut schemas open to precise empirical confirmation/falsification is nothing more than what he terms “muddled thought” (p. 9). Yet, as I already noted, even the *Communist Manifesto* is more than a compendium of empirical predictions; it is an attempt to articulate developmental tendencies within capitalism, and, importantly, to convince workers of the need for political action. Indeed, there has been a long tradition of scholarship that has focused on this practical/political dimension to Marx’s theory, one that cannot be adequately captured within the confines of positivist conceptions. In the diverse work of Jürgen Habermas (1971), Alvin Gouldner (1980), and Brian Fay (1987), we are treated to a more judicious discussion of Marx’s methodological position. While none of these authors are particularly enamored by classical Marxism, they at least realize that Marx’s theory was intimately empirical as well as critical and practical. In particular, each of these commentators note that for Marx the proof of his position lay within its educative function, the way it would change individual self-conceptions and ultimately change their political actions. As Fay (1987: 90) notes succinctly concerning Marx’s notion of theory: “. . .the point of knowledge is not to provide the means by which one can use particular causal processes, but to transcend these processes; it is not to learn how to get what one wants, but to learn to have different wants; it is not knowledge of external variables in order to manipulate them, but self-knowledge in order to be freed of them; it is not the ability to work with a system efficiently, but the power to alter this system fundamentally.” To play upon Marx’s famous Eleventh Thesis in *Theses on Feuerbach*: hitherto, social scientists have predicted the social world; the point, however, is to change it. If this is the case, Marx’s theory has been seemingly confirmed by the very multitude of individuals -- within politics and within academia -- who have found within Marx’s thought a way to understand the world and act within it. Of course, as Marx was fully aware on many occasions, such a theoretical commitment did not guarantee success.

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Given the concerns I have adumbrated, I might be charged with asking Hamilton to write another type of book -- a book that clearly attempts to look at the intellectual tradition that Marx was working within in order to assess the assumptions underlying his theoretical claims; a book that takes into consideration the vast tradition of scholarship that has analyzed his methodology and theory; a book that is willing to be open to the diverse positions that Marx himself took and articulated. It must be noted that, even if such a book had been written, there is still plenty of room for disagreement and critique. At least the advantage would be that the reader would be treated to a better overall sense of Marx's ideas, ideas that are both empirically grounded (in the best positivist sense) and resolutely "muddle-headed" (in the best interpretative, hermeneutical, and critical sense). In reaction to Hamilton's well-intended portrayal, I can imagine a Marx turning to Engels, as he did in response to supposed followers of his ideas during his lifetime, and exclaiming, "If that is what is meant by my theory, then I am not a Marxist!"

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Reclaiming the Environmental Debate. The Policies of Health in a Toxic Culture Edited by Richard Hofrichter, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press (2000), vi, 356 pp

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Before reading this book, I was reminded how Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* ushered in our national interest in environmental health in the early 1960's. Sustained consumer and scientific interest, however, were not overnight accomplishments; we are still trying to draw both scientific and popular attention to environmental health questions. While perhaps not with the same mobilizing force, Hofrichter's *Reclaiming the Environmental Debate* is highly recommended to those professionals, students, and consumers who work in or are interested in environmental health issues. This recommendation is not based on my total agreement with all of the authors contributing to this socio-political text, but rather my personal feeling that in order to develop an informed opinion all perspectives should be considered. If any phenomenon lends itself to multiple disciplines and various perspectives it is environmental health.

As stated in the "Introduction," the central theme of this text is that "effective challenges to toxic culture, as well as the potential for creating a compelling vision of a healthy society, grounded in everyday work and life, require reframing objectives so as to produce broad, comprehensive social change." In essence, this text wants to discuss the socio-political underpinnings of environmental actions and policy from a corporate, regulatory, and