

**Tony McKenna**

*The War Against Marxism: Reification and Revolution*

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## Reviewed by **Fouad Mami**

### About the reviewer

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Ever wonder how to domesticate an explosive theory while pretending you are refining it? McKenna's *The War Against Marxism* elucidates such a 'domestication-as-refining' without falling into conspiracy theories. He carefully examines the texts of self-purported Marxists and shows in a razor-sharp analysis how the war against Marx's methodology has been ragging in academia for

almost a century now.

It is not a tautology to observe that apart from actual wars between classes and nations, there exists underneath a terrible war of ideas. Upon closer scrutiny, McKenna finds that self-professed neo-Marxists and post-Marxists have succeeded in disfiguring Marx's ideas, rendering them both anachronistic and innocuous for the powers that be. The damage – for that is how it should be qualified according to the author – is carried out often by catapulting class struggle through several stylistic and thematic maneuvers, reifying the historical totality and rendering Marxism a purely theoretical abstraction divorced from reality.

McKenna starts with what he labels as the founding fathers of critical theory, often introduced in philosophy manuals not only as neo-Marxists but as the anti-fascist 'luminaries': Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Underneath their rhetoric of updating Marx's ideas for the realities of the early-to-mid twentieth century, McKenna tracks in their approach a Nietzschean disenchantment with ordinary people. Uncontrolled consumption on the part of the masses spells a false

consciousness, a situation that explains how a 'culture industry' is behind the infuriating reproduction of generic individuals. Without focus on the predominant mode of production, these thinkers strike at the universalist drive and logic of the enlightenment. McKenna deems that critique of universalism abstract because it refracts the egalitarian propulsion of modernity and seeks to stifle it. With the three theorists, the author finds a nostalgia for a world order where the undeserving masses knew their place in the world and acted accordingly.

In a second theoretical move, McKenna finds the 'celebrity' post-Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Chantal Mouffe, Ernest Laclau and Slavoj Žižek practicing a philosophy that is pre-Hegelian despite their claims to the contrary. With each one's endeavor there lies but a lip service to the concept of historical unfolding. Althusser claims to have resolved the base-superstructure problematic by leveling all contradictions: claiming on the one hand that ideology produces social beings, and on the other that ideology is but a discursive structure or system of myths and images, denuded of historical rationale or significance. Althusser invents a set of words such as 'structure', 'field of discursivity', 'discourse', while Mouffe and Laclau invent 'horizon' – all aiming to vaporize the subversive content of any given ideology. Žižek deploys Lacan's pre-given, ahistorical and reified notion of the Real *retroactively* in order to mediate it (the Real) historically through haunting. But haunting remains a purposeless historicity active despite itself, self-reflexive, not self-reflective. If haunting serves anything at all, McKenna explains, it confirms the convoluted process of Žižekian method and its illusive claims of historicity.

The third theoretical move addresses the writings of celebrity scholars such as Terry Eagleton and Fredric Jameson. In as much as they both portend themselves as first-and-foremost literary theorists, where the floating of signifiers and war on causality are the currency for imminence, the two authors illustrate their two-faced stance vis-à-vis the Hegelian approach. If taste and aesthetic sensibility register a constant change whereby humanity can deem Shakespeare outmoded, Eagleton only expresses his oversight of the Hegelian concept of sublation. For sublation underlines how brutal changes and radical breaks are fantasies nursed by the deranged. As historical change manifests itself too slowly, it involves both preservation and negation. It is this rule that makes a binding totality. But Eagleton falls instead for ideology which, according to him, solely determines taste. With respect to Jameson, the stipulation of the Lacanian 'Real', as the absent cause for history, annuls any sensible sense for approaching reality. McKenna traces several contradictions like 'history is not a text', and 'we encounter history only through a text'. The postmodernist stances where reality lacks a center, which the two stars

both prize more than their alleged Marxist credentials, stifle their analysis and absolve revolutionary substance.

The fourth theoretical chapter addresses Moishe Postone's critique of Lukács' reification theory. McKenna pinpoints how Postone's flawed reading of Marx spills over in how he mistakenly interprets Lukács. Instead of situating modernity as an acceleration from the mercantile mode of production, Postone mistakes bureaucracy and the work ethic embedded in Protestantism – both of which are essential corners of modernity – for the experience of reification. In seeking to update Marx by proposing that his subject matter is capital, not labor, Postone cannot register how the 'total subject' translates the self-realization of the proletariat into a revolution that will eventually cancel both classes and capital. McKenna follows with an elaborate contextualization of Lukács' theory of reification, which for him, truly qualifies as an extension of Marx's method. Zooming in on the proximity of Lukács' ideas with the living experience of workers, and in each theoretical sortie, McKenna follows the logical implications from the contradictions in the exchange of labor. For the capitalists, the exchange of wage with labor can only be a fair exchange. The capitalists and even the reified workers genuinely fail to register that any industry or business cannot stay afloat without the expropriation of surplus value, that amount of wealth generated beyond the socially necessary labor. Only the worker in transcending the reificatory nature of the exchange notes the injustice not of the exchange as such but in the exchange of the amount of labor accomplished *with* the wage received. All the thinkers McKenna addresses in the book fail to either note this basic fact (the tension that organically emerges from the contrastive registering of the terms of the contract), or to follow fully on its socio-political implications. For the reduction of the worker's wage into a cost (exactly like any other costs) in the production line is itself reification. In contrast, the conscious worker does not only seize on the meaning of reification but actively works to reverse it via a revolution in the mode of production and distribution.

These four chapters are interspersed with three others that are less heavy and more illustrative of the points addressed in the theoretical chapters. Chapter two reviews the film of *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* (1987) and finds that through its two protagonists, the film showcases both extreme instances of reification as well as several ways for its subversion. For the benefit of the general reader, chapter four teases further the qualitative dimensions of reification as experienced in everyday life, the way it is elaborated by McKenna's hero, Lukács. Chapter six

elucidates the Hegelian idea of subject-object identity through the protagonist's failure in a Stephen King's novel.

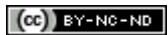
Overall, the wording of the chapters' titles strike the reader as particularly strong, candid and uncompromising; they raise an interesting discussion of polemic which McKenna also convincingly addresses in the final chapter. For him, academia should not practice willing blindness before convoluted publications: confused and confusing writing styles by celebrity academics such as the ones he carefully examines in *War Against Marxism*. He calls for, and rightly so, communicating in accessible language, never seeking to hide behind wordy formulations. McKenna is not totally flabbergasted at the ways in which such deleterious forms of writing escape detection by editors, reviewers and critics, and then connect that state of affairs with the war on Marxism, less as a conspiracy and more as an immanent subscription to a bourgeois worldview by so-called Marxist thinkers. This is a category of academics entertaining pronounced leftist sensitivities as they could be genuinely disgusted with the capitalist quagmire, but who still cannot take up the struggle for justice seriously or are willing to see that justice in their lifetimes.

McKenna's argument is warm and does not shy away from being occasionally passionate. Not all scholars are open to elaborate on their peers' writing styles, especially if such peers are well-known and well placed. But McKenna shows that convoluted writing – no matter who is behind it – serves a purpose. Not only does impoverished writing translate into a poor grasp of the Hegelian method, but is geared toward ridiculing Marx's findings in respect to subject-object identity being the *sine qua non* for the revolution. Still, of all his alertness, McKenna does not recount that Althusser advises his readers to skip the first chapter of *Capital* altogether and start from the second. If one abandons the fourth section of chapter one, the structuralist take of Althusser becomes less questionable. Such gross methodological derailments could have been explained by noting the cult of the vanguard, or the narcissist trust in the gifted individual, which Hegel brilliantly addresses early on in *Phenomenology of Spirit*. McKenna could have explained that the force of the Greek *logos* lies in translating the selfless verbalization of practical knowledge (not wisdom) from the pre-Socratic times to the present. That capacity to speak *la déchirure*, or the rupture from the Mesolithic order which the Neolithic Revolution has ushered in, explains that force behind *The Communist Manifesto*. Indeed, Marx and Engels qualify their method as scientific not because it is selfless, but because it further accounts for that rupture manifested throughout time and space. The unfolding of historical totality has no patience for a pathological ego.

In closing, *The War Against Marxism* serves an important corrective for the way literary theory is pathetically introduced: take any theory you want, or accelerate two or even three against each other in the free markets of ideas, regardless of their often irreconcilable fundamentals. Given such a liberal approach, theory has become a tool to keep universities busy, that is, forever enmeshed in what the French call *la parlerie*, that particularly empty exchange aiming to sell the illusion that something radical or truly subversive is being gestated but, in the meanwhile, the bourgeois idol remains untouched. In such circumstances, it is of little wonder that the humanities are constantly shelled. McKenna's contribution specifies, however indirectly, that literary theory is the warehouse that ensures the breeding of future cultural critics, art historians, sociologists and political scientists, that is, those individuals who can either enforce the bourgeois model or reverse it. Indirectly, McKenna is saying that even when one thinks they can afford to dismiss Marx's insights, one still cannot ignore the findings from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Accepting the unfolding of historical totality as an egoless instantiation disarms people's resistance to class war, as it becomes self-evident that Marx merely situates Hegel's historical method in its socio-political reality.

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