

## REVIEW ESSAY

*Gregory Claeys*

### THE STATE, THE BOURGEOISIE, AND CRITICAL CRITICISM

WUTHNOW, ROBERT. *Communities of Discourse. Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.), London 1989. ix, 739 pp. \$ 49.50.

Grand comparative syntheses in the sociology of knowledge of the type attempted here, where the genesis of the major modern western ideologies is recounted and recovered at great length and in great detail, are both brave and increasingly rare. In part this is owing not merely to increasing specialization, but also considerable shifts in methodological interest over the past thirty years. While Marx's influence, both beneficial and otherwise, continues to be felt in sociological reconstructions of the history of ideas, narrowly-construed materialist accounts of the emergence and flux of strands of thought, simply seeing ideas as imprisoned within or defined solely by particular class biases, are now thankfully passé. Much of what is now more often termed the history of languages and discourses protests against any simplistic reduction of utterance to context; witness most of what John Dunn, J. G. A. Pocock and Quentin Skinner have done for the history of political thought over the last 25 years. While the scope of many such historians is often equally as great as Wuthnow's, their biases have tended to induce a shying away from "sociological" explanations for why men and women say what they do, and towards language-oriented, speech-act seeking and "paradigmatic" explorations of a kind which normally raise language several spheres above the forays of class interest and tacitly devalue the question of agency. Descriptions of the context to which language is referable have thus become more hesitant (sometimes, for example in Pocock's frequent dismissal of the categories of "bourgeois ideology", with anti-Marxist aims in mind<sup>1</sup>). Class is here regarded as often

<sup>1</sup> See Isaac Kramnick, *Republicanism and Bourgeois Radicalism. Political Ideology in Late Eighteenth-Century England and America* (Ithaca, 1990) for a contrary view.

as being primarily coincident with certain ideologies in a given time and place, but giving emphasis and prominence in formulation rather than more strongly determining language *tout court*. This does not mean that context has been lost, but its role has been redefined and its linguistic meaning reaffirmed. For shifts in social and political terminology are now also related to the manifest failure of language to describe reality, and consequently the capacity of language to inhibit political action, as Gareth Stedman Jones has demonstrated in relation to the Chartist movement.<sup>2</sup> Such cautionary distancing from monocausal accounts of the evolution of language renders any grand project more intrinsically suspicious than would have been the case twenty years ago, and places a greater burden of proof on would-be synthesizers to define the relation of text to context more precisely than might formerly have been necessary. And at a more mundane level, there are vast literatures on every major field of the intellectual history of the last four centuries, and major challenges – did the “Enlightenment” even exist for most Europeans? – which render such projects even more liable to difficulty.

Nonetheless some continue undeterred to enter the fray, and not without success. Put briefly, Wuthnow’s overarching aim is to examine similarities in social conditions underlying three of the greatest challenges to the *status quo* in modern society – the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the rise of Marxian socialism – and to plot parallels between the growth of cultural ferment in each period, shifts in state power, and the process of fragmentation or consolidation of ruling elites. At each of these major crises, he argues, rapid economic growth often both augmented the resources of the state and engendered further competition among fractions of ruling elites. But this alone does not tell us why some strands or schools of thought became more attractive and acceptable in these periods and “become part of the institutional arrangements of European society itself” while “others failed or succeeded only on a modest scale” (p. 3), and how, therefore, economic, cultural and philosophic shifts are interlinked. The grand issue of base and superstructure, of cultural autonomy and “articulation”, or the proximity of cultural expression to its milieu (whose closeness may render it more attractive in the short-term but of less “eternal” value later), is thus at the core of this study. Within this framework Wuthnow contends that while cultural innovation occurred at points of exceptional European economic growth, it did not centrally legitimate the demands of new classes, particularly the bourgeoisie, which emerged from that growth. Instead Wuthnow offers a “conceptual scaffold” (an unfortunate term, perhaps, given the dual uses of scaffolds) to explain that

<sup>2</sup> Gareth Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class. Studies in English Working Class History 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1983), pp. 90–178.

Economic expansion alone did not create new opportunities for new ideas to emerge; rather, it resulted – in some areas – in new alignments among segments of the ruling elite (who themselves played active roles in furthering certain kinds of economic expansion).

Generally speaking, the new political alignments that accompanied each period of economic expansion included (a) an overall increase in the size and functional responsibilities of central regimes; (b) heightened diversity, tension, and cleavages within the ruling elite; and (c) a somewhat enlarged set of actors and issues relevant to the collective decision-making process. These changes, in turn, typically resulted in an expansion of the immediate organizational settings in which cultural production could take place, as well as a restructuring of the relations between culture producers and the state and a rise of new concerns about definitions of individual and collective responsibilities. (p. 9)

Within this process, then, cultural production, “selection” (the greater focus on some ideas, themes, etc., than others) and institutionalization, or cultural acceptance and integration, take place. This involves both comparative and theoretical concerns, which Wuthnow seems to feel historians are largely incapable of, and which dignify sociology’s claims (p. 6). Against “many students of the history of ideas” (unnamed), whom Wuthnow argues are prone to “thematize” ideas – just what this means, aside from being Bad from a Sociological Perspective, is unclear –, the effort here is to “emphasize the conditions under which diversity itself was able to develop”, specifically by showing “how culture producers’ relations to the state influenced their capacity to institutionalize new forms of ideology” (p. 11). This seemingly requires some new or redefined jargon to confuse the innocent (many a neophyte may end entangled on scaffolds like “social horizon”, “discursive field”, “figural action”,<sup>3</sup> or, roughly speaking, society, language, and theories). Culture and ideology (“an identifiable constellation of discourse that in fact stands in some degree of articulation with its social context”, p. 16) are also redefined somewhat. But mercifully there is no overly great effort of this sort to bludgeon and bewilder the general reader or erect further disciplinary barriers around sociology; as history the narrative is well-written.

How is this schema borne out in Wuthnow’s analysis? He begins by tracing the growth of trade, urban life and the growing autonomy of the cities, ecclesiastical ferment, political developments, financial and administrative alterations, the relative autonomy of some states, and other factors which formed the background to the Reformation. The urban context and

<sup>3</sup> All at once: “Luther, Voltaire, Marx [. . .] were able to formulate critical ideological discourse by thematizing certain features of their social environments, setting them in opposition to alternative visions of cultural authority, concretizing both by drawing on conflicts evident in the societies in which they wrote, and supplying figurations of behavior that mediated between present and idealized realities” (p. 15).

commercial basis of the spread of reform teachings is stressed, as is the promise of greater access to and participation in religion for artisans and craftsmen. As the balance of European power shifted gradually towards the towns, the beliefs shared by town-dwellers, the chief supporters of the Reformation, gained in influence wherever the power of the landed nobility could be curtailed (except where territorial princes upheld the Reformation). In Scandinavia and England, however, a more autonomous monarchy used the Reformation to offset the clergy's alliance with the nobility, and hence championed the cause of reform in order to weaken the landed interest. Where the Reformation faltered – for example in Poland – neither the towns nor the monarchy achieved a similar degree of relative autonomy, and increasing mercantile wealth primarily enriched the landed nobility (whose cattle and corn were the chief exports) rather than new urban classes. In France the landowning elite retained considerable influence in the cities, while in Spain neither the crown nor the cities were, Wuthnow argues, sufficiently independent, and the bourgeoisie never grew very powerful. The discourses of Reformation varied in part according to who was the chief reformer, with radical challenges from below to secular authority being usually rejected by urban authorities, and the uniformity of the English Reformation having much to do with the state's central role in reform.

So far, barring differences of emphasis, this does not look too dissimilar to traditional accounts of both the rise of a liberal bourgeoisie and of the Reformation. Wuthnow's treatment of the Enlightenment again provides a survey of economic history, and then comments on the evolution of mercantilist doctrine and increasing international competition. Official patronage of cultural and scientific activities, with the formation of new academies and societies, are described as having helped tie the literati more closely to states whose internal power expanded throughout this period. The growing civil services and increasingly educated clergy composed a larger elite readership appreciative of literary controversy and innovation. The scientific revolution helped to underpin Enlightenment optimism, empiricism in the hands of Locke became scepticism for Voltaire, while the experience of two centuries of religious conflict made toleration more appealing to most. Meanwhile the increasing power of the urban middle classes provided a social environment receptive to such ideas, and standards of taste at variance from those of the aristocracy. But Wuthnow denies (p. 204) that the French Enlightenment, for example, owed any special debt to the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, and places much greater emphasis on the literati, the bureaucracy and salon culture, all of whose proximity to the nobility was greater. A similar case can be made for England, where wealthy merchants were tied to the aristocracy in various ways, though Wuthnow pays too little attention to the Dissenting middle classes, whose academies

propounded Enlightenment ideals much more vigorously than Oxford and Cambridge and whose influence was vastly disproportionate to their numbers.

Crucially for Wuthnow, the Enlightenment flourished where the state bureaucracy was most enlarged, and where authority within this bureaucracy was most “heterarchic” (p. 178; a word not in the Oxford English Dictionary, but apparently meaning diffused and dispersed). Tensions between major administrative elements (e.g. in France, the royal household and the state bureaucracy) generated sufficient “relative autonomy” within ruling elites to permit the opening up of the “public sphere” which the Enlightenment both helped to create and depended upon, though increasing popular literacy was also important. The more obvious variations within this pattern – a much stronger state in France (though far from absolutist in the cultural sphere) than England, for example, and the much closer relation of many leading *illuminés* to the state – are indicated. State patronage of writers was also important in Britain, where few before the early nineteenth century could live from literature alone. In Germany political diversity combined with court patronage of learning to ensure considerable freedom of opinion, with larger numbers of scholars being employed by the bureaucracy itself in Prussia – which Wuthnow argues was more decentralized and less absolutist than is commonly contended – than elsewhere. Here, too, there was little direct support by the bourgeoisie for the expansion of learning, and correspondingly, “the new literary circles were outspokenly disappointed with the bourgeoisie’s taste for luxury consumption as opposed to intellectual efforts” (p. 245). (But where was this not true?) In the Scottish case, too, patronage assisted Kames, Millar, Ferguson, Smith and many others, and Edinburgh intellectual life tended to be dominated by professionals and the aristocracy rather than the commercial classes (whom the Scots on the whole nonetheless vindicated so enthusiastically).

In countries where the Enlightenment shone more dimly, such as Holland, Wuthnow argues that institutional factors were crucial, especially economic stagnation and the relative weakness of the state and bureaucracy (and here the bourgeoisie, even less helpful than elsewhere, created no great demand for Enlightenment literature). Similar conditions prevailed in Sweden and Austria; in all three cases political decentralisation is for Wuthnow central to the Enlightenment’s failure to become more institutionalized. Where autocracy was much more developed, however, as in Spain and Russia, state patronage of academies and universities took place, but intermediary social forces, such as the nobility, were for Wuthnow too weakened by centralization, and the intelligentsia rendered too subservient, to facilitate Enlightenment. Variations in the production and reception of the literature of the Enlightenment are also explained in part as a

consequence of the ambivalence of eighteenth-century writers towards their official roles and connections, and thus their wish to establish a “critical distance” (p. 316) while still feeding from the public trough. Despite its diversity, in fact, Wuthnow stresses that “a basic antinomy between established society and nature” (p. 325) was not only common to much Enlightenment thought, but connected to the discomfiting sense of their public authority felt by many of its producers, and their consequent sense of the superiority of private virtue (which looks much like earlier analyses of the “alienation” of the intelligentsia, though it is characterized here in a subtler and more persuasive form). This “discursive field”, rather than the ideological defense of the merchant class after the fact of its rise to power, is for Wuthnow the crucial sociological context for Enlightenment thought. Indeed the Enlightenment image of the bourgeoisie Wuthnow takes to be an ideal construct aiming at reforming and creating a model bourgeois from the outside, rather than a vindication from the inside, *post facto*.

In the final third of his book, Wuthnow examines the rise of Marxian and other late-nineteenth-century forms of socialism. The direct connection between the Enlightenment and socialism, through the decline in religious faith, the increasing independence of the intelligentsia and the spread of literacy generally, the ineffectiveness of the state compared to its proclaimed competence, and the growing fragmentation of elite power, are widely recognized. Novel in the nineteenth century were the industrial working class, the model of the French revolution as a mode of transformation, the vehicle of the political party as a form of organization, and bureaucratization within the party. Taking the most powerful socialist movement by 1914, Wuthnow examines Bismarck’s contribution to the German SPD in the context of German industrialization and state structure. Much of the SPD’s success, he argues, came not from industrial conditions *per se*, for in factory centres like Düsseldorf the party was relatively weak. Instead the political context was crucial to the SPD’s growth, especially the state’s encouragement of industry, the hegemony of the conservative ruling class and the aristocracy’s successes in retaining power and in keeping the liberal opposition weak, and the state’s assistance in providing a political identity for the SPD (especially by the anti-socialist laws), and its channelling of socialism into parliamentary politics.

In both the French and British cases liberalism was of course considerably stronger, and socialist parties were less consequential than in Germany. Socialism’s greater weakness in France resulted partly from her slower rate of industrialization, far fewer large factories, and proportionately larger rural population. Liberals and republicans provided greater competition, while among themselves socialists were more sectarian. In Britain the rate of industrialization was much higher, and the proletariat was proportionately much larger and further immiserated. If these circum-

stances alone were sufficient to foster a large and successful socialist movement, Britain should have outpaced Germany in the struggle for socialism. But British liberalism was also stronger, especially among the working classes, the party system was much more deeply entrenched, the trades' unions were less politicized, and there were substantial divisions among the already weak socialist groups.

Wuthnow also briefly considers socialism in other parts of Europe, finding generally that wherever liberal parties were weakest (e.g. Sweden), the socialist movement made the greatest headway, while greater liberal strength (e.g. Norway) inhibited such progress. Socialism in Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain is also briefly treated in order to reinforce the argument that neither the pace and extent of industrialization nor the size of the proletariat bore a direct relationship to the success of socialist aims. In treating socialist ideology, Wuthnow concentrates on the relationship between theory and practice as dictated by the everyday struggle of the socialist movement, which led to a widespread desire for political power, and produced considerable ideological diversity throughout Europe. Just as the leading Enlightenment thinkers sought to construct an ideal concept of the emancipatory bourgeoisie, too, Wuthnow argues that a key element of socialist ideology was the elaboration of a similarly "symbolically laden category" (p. 490) of the proletariat. The latter was invested with heightened, progressive moral qualities, and linked to the notion of an evil bourgeoisie and an eventual classless society in a "discursive field", "a symbolic representation that stood for many of the negative features of industrial society and at the same time pointed towards a redemptive escape from these negative conditions" (p. 500). Here, just as the concept of the bourgeoisie did not grow from a previously distinct bourgeois class, that of the proletariat was a refracted, idealized image of reality. But if Wuthnow is useful on this positing of an ideal class, he is weaker on who does this and why, upon how classes become invested with particular virtues, and how, for example, both the bourgeoisie and proletariat shared an ideology of labour and productivity which both used to argue against an "unproductive" aristocracy, and which constituted a central aspect of each class's claim to superiority.

By way of a conclusion, Wuthnow offers some seventy pages of reflections on the relationship between social and cultural alteration generally. This focusses on a discussion of two theories of change, one emphasizing the adaptation of culture to increasing social complexity, and especially urbanization and industrialization, and notably associated with Durkheim and Parsons, the other of which stresses theoretical shifts as a function of class legitimation, usually identified principally with Marx, though it includes some of Weber's approach. As might be expected, Wuthnow here is chiefly concerned to emphasize the need to refine these approaches, and

particularly the class legitimation view, in light of the complexity of cultural change in the three periods studied here. Using Bourdieu, Therborn and others, Wuthnow argues for a more reciprocal approach to cultural alteration which sees greater autonomy and determinacy in cultural phenomena, while recognizing that “specific historical conjunctures [make] cultural change possible” (p. 535). Wuthnow considers that his own stress on culture-producing organizations, the tying of texts to political struggles rather than broader movements of classes, and institutional context generally rather than, for this period, “the rise of the market”, helps to situate and concretize cultural change. His interpretative focus is thus resolutely social and political; economic and class determinism are set aside in favour of an emphasis upon the crucial role of state mediation in particular.

This is thus a synthetic work of considerable learning based upon a very wide use of sources. Its central claim respecting the relation of ideas to context is particularly useful in stressing the political context and state response to cultural change, for example the crucial importance of state patronage to Enlightenment. Such conclusions provide a substantial challenge to any who would apply economic determinism to the contexts discussed here. But the book’s very breadth will inspire respect and disagreement alike, for so much is covered that inevitably some generalizations are weak. There are areas here, thus, as in any similar work of synthesis, which might have been thought out further. Wuthnow’s emphasis upon common factors in the Reformation, the Enlightenment and late nineteenth-century socialism is not very illuminating; he insists, for example, that in all three “diversity often resulted in particular ideological themes being selectively reinforced by the unique constellation of social factors in the settings in which they emerged” (p. 487), which is unlikely to shatter most of his readers’ preconceptions. Moreover, Wuthnow asserts that “The Protestant reformers’ image of God and the bourgeois ideal of the eighteenth century, like the vision of a classless society, were clearly utopian categories that had no discernable referent in observable reality” (p. 496), while seemingly conceding that this mythical aspect is central to all ideological claims. (More convincingly, however, he offers the case for seeing each of the three main movements as possessing a common “oppositional structure” – ecclesiastical tradition vs. scriptural authority, inherited knowledge vs. nature, capitalist vs. classless society – which help to define their discursive distinctness; p. 555). Nonetheless *Communities of Discourse* deserves to be read carefully, and its conclusions pushed to the full extent of their logic. It is a major contribution to the sociology of modern intellectual history which deserves a substantial readership.

Gregory Claeys