
Anti-Bourgeois for What?: A Reflective Response to Gary Hall's 'Anti-Bourgeois Theory'

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Abstract

This short commentary responds to Gary Hall's programmatic critical provocation 'Anti-Bourgeois Theory'. It points to some of the issues involved in understanding the politics of French 'theory' when detached from its historical context, and invites reflection on the resonances between Hall's positions and those of some key thinkers in the Marxist tradition.

Keywords

post-structuralism Marxism, Liberalism, Critical Theory, Socialism, Bourgeois

The first thing I'll say in response to Gary Hall's very timely provocation is that I don't disagree with any of it; and I think many readers will recognise the dilemmas that he highlights. How do we keep faith with a serious opposition to the norms of possessive individualism, in a culture that simply demands our complicity with them? How do we situate ourselves in relation to the sustained and still-ongoing neoliberal attack on a set of institutions – from traditional universities to the mainstream press – that we never believed in (indeed, that our political and theoretical positions were first formulated *in opposition to*)? These are issues facing not just radical theorists but political activists and cultural practitioners across a vast range of fields and disciplines.

However, there is a particular issue with the field of ‘radical theory’ on which Hall is commenting here, and from which much of his own work has historically proceeded, which is a formation that I think still bears the marks of its peculiar conditions of emergence in the 1970s and 80s. The core canonical thinkers of this field, especially its formative ‘post-structuralist’ phase – Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze etc – all belonged to a generation of Parisian thinkers who lived through, contributed to and were shaped by the wave of radical democratic, anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian politics that swept over much of the planet during the 60s and 70s. But their fame and the longevity of their influence owe at least as much to a more discrete and politically ambiguous set of cultural-historical phenomena. For all that they themselves produced persuasive philosophical rejections of ideas like authorship, originality and the philosophical canon, they owed their profiles as much as anything to a formally conservative French intellectual culture that has historically placed a high value on ‘philosophy’, understood as participation in a distinctive and largely self-enclosed tradition of thought stretching back into antiquity, and to the historic fascination of American elite academics with that French intellectual culture (a discernible phenomenon at least since the days of William James’ vocal and sustained advocacy for the work of Henri Bergson).

In fact, I’d suggest that their popularity and effective canonisation in the 1980s derived as much as anything else from the specific situation in which liberal scholars in elite American universities found themselves at that time: under attack both from the New Right and its conservative allies, and from the New Left, as scholars – many of them former student radicals – influenced by Marxism, women’s liberation and the black freedom struggle began to find footholds in the academy.

Of course, figures like Foucault, Derrida etc, were clearly themselves members of that same New Left generation, or its Parisian equivalent: those shaped above all by the experience of 1968. But as such, their work was always influenced by the ways in which the cohort of radicals had been forced to distance themselves from the official Marxist-Leninism of the French Communist Party, and of those intellectuals most closely associated with it (among them Sartre and Althusser). And I think it was this scepticism towards orthodox Marxism as one of the features of their thought that made it attractive to liberal scholars in the United States in the 1980s.

In France itself, there was never any question that these were figures of the left, and were absolutely not engaged in promoting any form of liberalism. There was a specific movement among French philosophers to very explicitly reject the Marxist and Communist tradition in favour of a celebration of Western liberalism; this was precisely the project of the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*, who were utterly detested by Foucault, Derrida et al. But outside of those French political debates, it was relatively easy to deploy their ideas – or a particular version of them – in defence of a particular strand of American liberalism that had always (again, at least since the days of William James and the other early pragmatists) combined a penchant for radical relativism with a tendency towards political agnosticism (or at least a discursive style that rarely did anything so gauche as to declare an explicit political commitment).

To put this as clearly as possible: in France, Derrida et al may have been understood as *soixante-huitards* and unapologetic members of the libertarian socialist left. And yet it wasn't as revolutionary thinkers that they were being read and taught at Yale, but as exotic avant-gardists who could be slotted quite neatly into a basically anti-political tradition of mannered liberalism. And if they hadn't been being taught at Yale, then it's doubtful that anyone would be talking about them now.

This account feels very remote from present realities, but it's probably worth pointing out that when I went to Sussex to study Critical Theory in 1994 – just a couple of years, I think, after Hall arrived there himself at the very high water mark of the fashionability of deconstruction (he did a PhD with Geoff Bennington – the doyen of Anglophone Derrideanism), I was laughed at by my fellow-students each time I used the very word that appears in the title of Hall's essay: 'bourgeois'. Several times, I recall very clearly, I suggested in seminars that the anti-individualism of post-structuralists such as Derrida surely had some affinity with the Marxist critique of bourgeois individualism, and each time I was mocked by at least some of my peers for the quaint old-fashioned redundancy of my 'unreconstructed Marxism'.

This may be a mere anecdote, but I think it remains highly relevant to many of the issues raised in Hall's essay and the particular ways in which he raises them. Because this is an article that names its purpose as 'anti-bourgeois', which features a denunciation of the vulgar anti-intellectualism of English elite culture, and a series of acute observations on the class politics of academic knowledge-production, and yet

which makes no explicit engagement with Marxism or the Marxist tradition, except to denounce some of its practitioners for their complicity with bourgeois liberal norms.

That isn't a criticism of the essay at all, and I think that most of those practitioners of Marxism would entirely agree with Hall's critiques, while suggesting that there are valid strategic, contingent political reasons for not wanting to deprive left-wing publishers of income-streams and for using the bourgeois apparatus of celebrity and elite scholarship to promote radical ideas when no other means are available. I'm not saying they're necessarily right. My point isn't to defend them or to undermine their putative defences. My point here is simply that I think they would all see themselves as making necessary compromises in the service of a more sustained and determinate project: the achievement of a form of society (be it fully 'communist', or merely somewhat more democratic than the ones we inhabit today) wherein the social relations that produce phenomena such as copyright law had themselves been transformed beyond recognition. This would be their defence I think: the compromises they make now might be necessary if they are to serve the long-term goal of socialism; and socialism is the only long-term goal that is really likely to put an end to the reign of copyright, or bourgeois liberalism, or the public-school educated philistines that govern English cultural institutions.

Whether or not we accept such defences, they at least indicate the possibility of being – at least in theory – not merely *against* something (be it neoliberalism, or bourgeois liberalism, or any of the other things that Hall states or implies that he's against), but *for* something: socialism, communism, radical democracy, social democracy, etc. And the question that persists for me in reading Hall's essay is simply this. I understand what he's against, but what is he *for*? Perhaps more specifically: in the name of what, on what grounds, according to what criteria, for what reasons, is he against the things that he's against? Is this a contribution to socialist thought? And if not, why not?

More specifically: how does his brilliant critique of bourgeois elite culture and its endemic philistinism (especially in its English iteration) differ from, or relate to, that of Lukacs (who argued that the bourgeoisie were incapable of thinking historically or dialectically), or the analysis made by Perry Anderson & Tom Nairn in their classic (and explicitly Marxist) analysis of 'the peculiarities of the English' (that explicitly

critiques English elite anti-intellectualism as grounded in anti-theoretical empiricism)? What's the relationship between his evocation of McKenzie Wark's denunciation of contemporary bourgeois fiction, and the denunciations of bourgeois fiction made by Marxist critics (from Lukacs to Brecht to Bakhtin to Colin MacCabe) over the course of the 20th century? And more specifically still: how does he understand the relationships between his own practices of anti-copyright, and any wider movement to challenge relations of property and individuality in other spheres and on other scales? Does he, for example, situate himself as a member of any determinate wider movement, such as the loose network of 'pirate parties' that emerged in some European cities in the 2010s?

I ask these questions in a spirit of genuine inquiry, and not at all in the sense of issued challenges. It seems to me, for example, that there is a clear continuity between some of Hall's practice and a certain tradition of politically radical experimentalism. That tradition would include, for example, certain strands of autonomist Marxism: wherein, indeed, the promotion of individual celebrity figures has been conventionally eschewed in favour of collective writing and theorising (I'm thinking here of groups like the Midnight Notes collective), and the work of historically important activist groups such as the Combahee River Collective, and with the spirit of early experiments in collective or anonymous knowledge-production online. Some of these projects had an explicit orientation towards some kind of libertarian socialism; others were more loosely anarchistic or libertarian in character (and as such, often turned out to be easily appropriated by strands of neoliberalism).

To be very clear here, my own perspective is that there's no necessary choice to be made between, on the one hand, for example, building an anti-copyright, anti-property, anti-capitalist knowledge-production system (which is where much of Hall's creative and critical energy has been directed, for many years) and, on the other, working to build a political movement or project capable of using the state power to create equivalent systems on a much larger scale. Both are valid and necessary strategic objectives, I think. But I say this from a perspective that is explicitly socialist and explicitly oriented towards the general aim of building collectivist, egalitarian and libertarian alternatives to capitalist society and bourgeois

culture. And what wearied me long ago about the critical tradition that I've mentioned, and that has shaped so much of my thinking and Hall's, is that any such objective is so rarely named or formulated by its key texts, and I'm not sure that that's a demurral that helps anything at all; apart from the reproduction of hegemonic liberalism. And I'm not totally sure on the basis of what political assumptions Hall's 'anti-bourgeois theory' is actually being formulated.

Finally, I'd point out that the idea that elite academic culture might not serve any very radical purpose is hardly a new one. Historically, once people have come to that conclusion, they've generally set themselves the task of trying to constitute institutions or make forms of cultural engagement that could enable communities of people outside the social elite both to produce knowledge and to acquire different kinds of education. In the UK we could point to projects such as the Workers Education Association and History Workshop as elements of this tradition. Both have been contexts in which profoundly important and innovative theoretical work has been done, but also in which very basic forms of canonical radical knowledge (such as the historical materialist theory of social change) have been reproduced and disseminated. The very existence of such institutions proves correct one of Hall's basic theses: that working class people are not as stupid as bourgeois elite culture constantly tries to tell them that they are *and also tries to tell members of the middle and elite classes that they themselves are too*. I wonder how, if at all, Hall sees his arguments and his practice as fitting in with, or responding to, or reacting against, or simply ignoring, that particular tradition of anti-bourgeois theory.

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