



## The reinvention of tradition: Marxist art history and the organization of radical politics

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### review of

W. Carter, B. Haran and F.J. Schwartz (eds.) (2013) *ReNew Marxist art history*, London: Art Books. (HB, pp. 520, £45.00, ISBN 978-1-908970-11-4)

In the introduction to his book, *Icons of the left*, O.K. Werckmeister (1999: 1-2) argued that the problem Marxists faced after the collapse of the Soviet bloc concerned not so much the validity of their ideas, but whether they could have any lasting organic relation to effective political organizations and action in capitalist society. Any claims to a revival of Marxist thought in a globalised capitalist economy must therefore not revert simply to historical scholarship on the subject, or worse, hagiographic and nostalgic writing, the types of which Werckmeister sought to critique. Instead, it must have a clear-sighted relevance to contemporary politics and culture (Werckmeister, 1999: 156-57).

Werckmeister writes as an art historian. The recent history of this discipline is a particularly interesting test case for those interested in producing a politicized research culture. Art history has had a long and rich Marxist tradition, from the writings and designs of William Morris, through to an inter-war series of art historians alienated by the rigid doctrines of the Second Internationalist and Stalinist *Diamat*, and then a further generation radicalised by the New Left and the events of May 1968. The aim of a recent essay anthology, *ReNew Marxist art history* (henceforth *RMAH*), is not only to study this tradition, but also to provoke art historians to revive it (thus the ambiguity of the highlighted 're-' in the

'ReNew' of its title). Two other anthologies published prior to *RMAH* pursue similar goals. *Marxism and the history of art* (Hemingway, 2006a, henceforth *MATHOA*) and *As radical as reality itself* (Beaumont et al., 2007, henceforth *ARARI*) also presented themselves as attempts to reinvigorate Marxist research in art history and visual culture. Perhaps aware of Werckmeister's warning, the editors of these volumes argue that a return to a Marxist tradition in art history could be something more than an exercise in nostalgia (Beaumont, 2007: 16; Hemingway, 2006b: 1; Roberts, 2007: 21). This review evaluates their strategies in producing a contemporary culture of Marxist scholarship. This exercise is of interest not just to art historians, but those pursuing similar projects in the humanities and social sciences.

The idea of a revival of a 'culture' of Marxist scholarship, rather than simply Marxist ideas, is particularly important for art history. Because Marx himself wrote little on art, Marxist concepts and ideas were developed by a long and complex history of debates amongst Marxists and scholars from the late-nineteenth century to the present. This situation differentiates the Marxist revival represented in *RMAH*, *MATHOA* and *ARARI* from similar revivals in other disciplines that focus on specific concepts based in Marx's work. A current revival of 'labour process theory' in organization studies, for instance, argues that a pre-1914 Marxist view on the relations between work, capital accumulation and value is the most useful in understanding the organization of labour in contemporary, post-industrial societies (Adler, 2007). Borrowing a term from Eric Hobsbawm, Paul S. Adler, the foremost scholar in this revival, claims to hold a 'paleo-Marxist' position, one in which seemingly 'retro-' Marxist ideas are argued to have contemporary relevance (Adler, 2007: 1314). In contrast, art historians cannot claim a single or dominant Marxist set of concepts in relation to art. Instead, they have to engage with the complex and scattered strands of Marxist thinkers and schools in the history of their discipline.

This situation for Marxist art history means that, paradoxically, the idea of revival in *MATHOA*, *ARARI* and *RMAH* depends on the idea of 'tradition'. The claim to renew Marxist art history depends on both the idea of Marxism as a continuous tradition (the tradition being renewed) and on the idea of Marxism as a counter-tradition critiquing the orthodoxy of the present conditions for art historical research and thereby justifying its renewal<sup>1</sup>. The exploration of Marxism as both a historical tradition of thought and a living counter-tradition provides the logic for

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1 The idea of a Marxist tradition is used repeatedly by the editors with this meaning (14). The term counter-tradition is used once to describe the Marxist history of art, but with the meaning of its use clearly stated (26). The idea of a counter-tradition is also used by John Roberts (1994b: 14) in his introduction to *Art has no history!*.

the selection and collection of the essays in *RMAH*, *MATHOA* and *ARARI*. *ARARI* is focused mostly on the idea of Marxism as a 'counter-tradition' by collating essays that most concern modern and contemporary art, or by directing Marxist theory towards contemporary problems. *MATHOA*, on the other hand, is mostly focused on producing a historiography of the Marxist art historical tradition from William Morris, through a series of art historians with strong presence of German and Austrian émigrés, to the development and waning of the New Left during the 1980s. Both Marxism's traditions and Marxist critiques of contemporary scholarship are pursued equally in *RMAH*, with a section of essays on contemporary or near-contemporary art, and a section on historiography that extends its investigation into non-Marxist figures such as Aby Warburg and Walter Pater.

However, the key stake of these anthologies is neither the critique of the present nor re-evaluation of the past. It is rather the definition of Marxist research itself. This is evident when one contrasts these anthologies with earlier ones. The advantage of the anthology format for Marxist art history during in the 1970s and 1980s was that it left relatively open parameters for a multifaceted and diversified subject matter. I am thinking of anthologies such as *Marxism and art* (1972) edited by Lang and Williams, the later anthology by Maynard Solomon also called *Marxism and art* (1979), and the short though sophisticated collection *Aesthetics and politics*, first published in 1977 (Adorno, et al., 2010). These books were the means by which students could navigate themselves through a very complex body of scholarship that dealt with broad, open-ended problems on the social nature of aesthetics and artistic production. In the same sense, *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* use the anthology-format for the same purpose. But their editorial essays attest that these collections are not just open explorations in their subject, but projects aiming at a tighter definition of Marxism and Marxist art history. Each volume argues that the project of renewing Marxist history is one of extracting it from the forms of art historical practice that have dominated over the last thirty years: Marxist art history is to be differentiated from postmodern and post-structural scholarship, but also from the new art history, cultural studies, visual culture and the social history of art (Hemingway, 2007: 32-33; Leslie, 2007; Beaumont, 2007)<sup>2</sup>. The editors of *RMAH* claim that their intentions are 'to provide a snap of the state of an art history that can be considered properly Marxist' (6).

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2 A study of Marxist art history's tensions with cultural studies, and an account of why an art historian like Andrew Hemingway 'stayed within' art history while others left the subject when it underwent Marxist and post-structural critique, forms the first essay of *RMAH*. See John Roberts's (2003) essay, 'Art history's furies'.

One might have noticed a problem here. Marxist art history is defined against what it is not. The definition of what is 'properly Marxist' in concrete, conceptual terms is never directly dealt with in the editorial arguments of these texts. The declaration of Marxism's difference to other traditions in cultural theory does not seem intended to clarify Marxist ideas, but to mark a change in the history of how Marxists understand their own identity. That *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* distinguish themselves so definitively against post-structuralism, in particular, marks a recent and significant shift. This becomes evident when one compares these anthologies with two earlier ones, *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988) and *Art has no history!* (Roberts, 1994a). The editors of the former volume argued that Marxism would maintain its relevance only by undergoing a post-structural critique that would integrate it into the theoretical trends that developed during the 1970s and 1980s (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 7-10). However, the editors also noted that this process creates a 'crisis of definition' for Marxism as its traditional categories and foci – economic relations and the class struggle integral to them – become side-lined (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 12). This process led Fredric Jameson to note, in his contribution to the volume, that he felt 'one of the few Marxist's left' (Jameson, 1988: 347)<sup>3</sup>. It is this crisis of definition for Marxism that perhaps led the editor of the second volume, John Roberts, to identify the same contrary relationship between Marxism proper and post-structuralism as claimed by *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA*. However, whereas Roberts (1994b: 20-23) sought to revise the excesses of post-structural thought by confronting some very particular theoretical problems, the latter volumes are more emphatic that Marxism is an contrary intellectual agent to post-structuralism, and its resurgence is necessitated by the increasing institutionalization, if not instrumentalization, of post-structuralism within art history departments, museums and journals.

Putting post-structuralism aside, *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA* also display a distrust of contemporary theory and sociology. This distrust is stated most openly in Warren Carter's introduction to *RMAH* where he diagnoses a 'rush to the contemporary' in recent art historical scholarship, a movement partly precipitated by the esteemed position of the journal, *October* (25-6). He reads into this focus on contemporary art and its twinning with contemporary theory a pseudo-avant-gardism consistent with the current demands of art patronage found in museums and in the market. This distrust of the contemporary may also extend to contemporary Marxist scholarship. Figures as obscure to many

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3 See also Perry Anderson's unflinching defence of his classical Marxist position against accusations of 'logocentrism' as 'a kind of common sense' (Nelson and Grossberg, 1988: 337).

outside the field of art history like Arnold Hauser and Meyer Schapiro take much more prominence in these collections than the publicly more prominent 'neo-Marxists' of the present. Figures such as Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière and Slavoj Žižek are only occasionally cited or discussed (Roberts, 2007: 25-7). That such instances of citation and discussion are relatively rare and brief, and that the editors of *RMAH* argue that some historical perspective on them is needed by a future project on Marxist art history (13), indicates that they are yet to earn trust from at least the contributors of these anthologies.

For research interests at least, this distanced stance on contemporary theoretical trends and the greater attention given to more neglected academic figures is one of the most valuable elements on these collections. But in his introduction to *ARARI*, John Roberts develops some ideas on the political value of such historic studies and their importance to assuming the contrarian positions found in the editorial essays of *RMAH*, *ARARI* and *MATHOA*. Studies of the traditions of Marxist art history reveal a period in its development when radical politics was genuinely divisive amongst scholars, and such divides were themselves productive. It is not so much a revival or clarification of the methods and theories of the earlier generations of Marxists that is important here (and Roberts does not like the idea of 'revivalism' for this reason), but rather the production of what he calls an 'openly political and contestory culture' (Roberts, 2007: 21). A revival of Marxism would not simply be the revival of the use of Marxist terms and concepts, but the framing of the debates across the expansive field of art history on political terms.

Perhaps unfortunately, the studies of Marxist art history within *ARARI*, *MATHOA* and *RMAH* also reveal their own limitations in producing this 'contestory culture'. If one is to draw a clear distinction between these current Marxist anthologies and the interwar and New Left art historians they describe, it is that whereas the former are focused on the history of Marxist art historians and artists in the modern and contemporary periods, the latter were also involved in debates concerning the medieval and early modern periods and engaged in using, adapting and subtly subverting the conceptual tools they inherited from formalist and stylistic art history. If a lesson is to be drawn from the studies in these volumes, it is that a Marxist revival has to concern itself not just with theoretical debates about its conceptual tools, history and contemporary position, but also with providing Marxist solutions to art-historical problems faced by non-Marxist art historians.

This is an obvious point. But it is one that points to the limitation of the anthology format. If a Marxist revival in art history depends not on the validity of specific concepts and schools of thought, but on a politicized research culture

across the various fields of the discipline, this cannot be sustained by the limited and closed forum of the anthology. The ambitions of *RMAH* in particular extend beyond its substantial size. The subject matter of this collection is wider than that of *MATHOA* and *ARARI*. It includes papers that extend further than the concerns for the historiography of Marxist art history and Marxist critiques of contemporary art and art historical institutions. As well as sections on these subjects<sup>4</sup>, this collection has two further sections on subjects related to landscape painting on the one hand, and on modernism on the other. This has expanded it to a much greater size than its forebears. It comprises twenty-seven essays and is just over 500 pages long. It seems, therefore, that if a renewal of Marxism in art history would ultimately require the presentation of research framing the debates on Marxist terms across the discipline, it could only present itself in a serial format, such as a journal or a book series, as was seen during with the journals *BLOCK* and *Kritische Berichte*, which defined the development of the new art history in the 1970s and 1980s. Hopefully, *RMAH* will encourage the establishment of a journal dedicated to sociological, if not Marxist, work in art history.

In his introduction to *RMAH*, Carter asks what ‘a social history of the social history of art would look like’ (14). His answer is that it would be a history of art historical institutions: museums, journals, auction houses and university departments. Partly, I hope to have shown that Marxist anthologies have themselves had an interesting history within the discipline of art history, and would occupy a small corner or footnote of a social history of the discipline. They trace how Marxists in art history and cultural studies have understood and debated their position within the discipline through the last several decades. Marxists have to consider how they use such institutions. The success or failure of contemporary Marxist art history may show how Marxist revivals in humanities and social science research depend not just on the coherence or usefulness of Marxist ideas, nor just on their ability to critique contemporary institutions and intellectual trends, but also on the production of living forums and communities of dedicated scholars across an expanse of research interests. I do not claim that this is a satisfactory response to Werckmeister’s problem on the relationship between Marxist academics and political struggles. For many, academic institutions are an insignificant, even irrelevant, site of political contest. But if Marxist scholars can organise themselves in this little backyard of theirs, then their influence is more likely to extend beyond it.

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4 See sections one and four: ‘Marxist theory in practice’ and ‘Marxism in a new world order’.

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