No camps in Dorking

Is Terry Eagleton in earnest? The nagging question is stirred in the reader’s mind by the very first sentence of the very first page of Why Marx Was Right. “This book has its origin in a single, striking thought”, Eagleton tells us, “What if all the most familiar objections to Marx’s work are mistaken? Or at least, if not totally wrongheaded, mostly so?” Are we supposed to ignore the tongue in Eagleton’s cheek? His political commitments are the stuff of well-toned legend. Readers of his memoir, The Gatekeeper (2002), can make an educated guess as to the place and time at which this “striking thought” first struck Eagleton: Cambridge in the early 1960s. That’s almost fifty years and over forty books ago. Moreover, the question by now defines an entire genre. Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx, Meghnad Desai’s Marx’s Revenge, Slavoj Žižek’s reissue of classic texts by Trotsky and Mao, Alain Badiou’s The Communist Hypothesis all state the case.

The suspicion that Eagleton is pandering to a notionally naive readership is confirmed by the lapses in which his text wanders. Often, his text will consist of ten wrong-headed ideas attributed to Marx, which he will rebut in “no particular order of importance”. This is not, we are clearly meant to understand, anything as uncool as a systematic critique of Marx or Marxism. The first two chapters – on Marx’s text in the 1840s, on the supposed obsolescence of Marxism and on Marxism as unfreedom – and the last four chapters of the book – on class politics, on violence, on the State and on “new social movements” – more than deliver on this low-brow promise. The examples are up to date – Stalinism was like the internet dropped into the Middle Ages. The language is crude. “To go [sic] socialist, you need to be reasonably well-heeled”. The Russian peasantry in the horrors of the 1920s, Eagleton imagines, would be confronted with capital management consultants – presumably because on a Stalinist theory of social development, McKinsey is to premodern tribe as Stalinist collectivizer is to Ukrainian peasant. Since Stalinist violence was the result of backwardness, if true socialism “took over in the Home Counties”, only an “unusually bold-faced” sceptic would ever expect “labour camps in Dorking”. We are in the world of the idiot’s not the Young Person’s Guide.

Chapters Three to Six, however – on determinism, utopia, economism and materialism – could be said to redeem the book. Here the knockout language is toned down and Eagleton develops a version of Marxism that is consistent with his other well-documented commitments. What Eagleton distills out of Marx is a “philosophical anthropology”, a view of our collective human nature on which to found a social and political theory and a vision of history. As individuated human beings we have in common our needy, labouring, sexual, self-reflexive, selfexpressive animal bodies. “Human consciousness…is corporeal… it is… a sign of the way in which the body is always in a sense unfinished, open-ended, always capable of more creative activity…”. Change “is not the opposite of human nature”. Eagleton insists: “it is possible because of the creative, open-ended, unfinished beings we are”. What drives history are the struggles individually and collectively to satisfy those needs. All hitherto existing history, or rather, in Marxian terms, pre-History, has about it the quality of compulsive, deterministic, forced motion precisely because of the impossibility under current conditions of reconciling individual needs collectively. But this oppressive, tragic reality is a spur to action. “There seems to be something in humanity which will not bow meekly to the insolence of power.” As Eagleton puts it in his most lyrical lines of the book: “Tragedy is not necessarily without hope. It is rather that when it affirms, it does so in fear and trembling, with a horror-stricken countenance”. Even if they haven’t read Eagleton’s recent book Reason, Faith, and Revolution (2009), some sensitive readers may thrill to the religious overtones in such passages. They may also be tempted to jump to the obvious conclusion: Professor Eagleton clearly believes that Karl Marx captured the truth about human nature. Socialism is the social and political system that best conforms to that nature. So why not simply reboot and rebuild society from those natural foundations up? Indeed, Eagleton him-