

American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas. By Dario Fernandez-Morera. Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996.

The topic is pertinent, the title inviting, no doubt, to intellectuals across a wide philosophical spectrum, but this work is likely to appeal finally to a much smaller group of readers. On the one hand it is replete with all the trappings of academic scholarship; on the other it falls so far below the minimal standards of rational analysis and scholarly precision as to make it unacceptable to any in either academia or what the author calls "the outside world" except the most frantic sympathizers with his sentiments. This book seems addressed primarily to partisans unlikely to challenge its premises or documentation.

In his introduction Dario Fernandez-Morera asks why "for many academicians . . . Karl Marx's ideas remain preferred explanations of how the world works" (1). The answer he proposes in his concluding chapter, which I found his most interesting, is that "the socialist organization of the universities" (177) attracts naive, impractical sorts who like being "protected from both the unintended and the intended consequences of their thought" (180) and who are thus inclined by their interest, nature, and training to "blur the distinction between the factual and the imaginary" (180). Unfortunately Fernandez-Morera, a specialist in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish literature, shows no interest in or awareness of the methods and literature of the sociology of American higher education which might justify such a broad claim with any specificity. Rather he proceeds anecdotally—he is a skilled and engaging writer—with only the most casual efforts to present or document his speculations in precise, quantified, or verifiable form.

His chief effort to quantify his claim of the pervasiveness of Marxist views in academia is this:

a recent issue of the *Arts & Humanities Index* lists Marx and Lenin as the two most frequently cited sources in arts and humanities journals over a seven-year period: This means that in their professional work, arts and humanities academicians routinely refer to Marx and Lenin more often than to Aristotle, Plato, Shakespeare, or even God Himself (the Bible ranked only sixth on the list). (3)

Fernandez-Morera's wittily presented ranking does of course not prove the larger claim he intends it to support. In the chapter endnote, conceding that the *Index* does not show the attitudes reflected in these citations, he asks us to accept his assurance that they are "by and large sympathetic" (17). How many of them did he check? The information in the endnote suggests that he not only did not check the citations in question, but did not consult the *Arts and Humanities Index* at all! His reference is to a January 1993 article in the *Chicago Tribune*, which is apparently his daily newspaper (it is his most frequently cited source, far ahead by my count of Marx himself). The *Chicago Tribune* is no doubt a fine source for some kinds of information, but it is clearly not a useful reference for readers who might wish to verify the author's claim: for example by checking the unnamed issue of the *Arts and Humanities index*, by comparing it with other issues and sources, or by determining the nature of the specific citations; all these

are in fact minimal checks we might have expected a responsible researcher to perform. This casual reliance on the daily newspaper is even more annoying in the several cases in which, after reading Fernandez-Morera's extended critique of a quoted passage, we discover that the passage is quoted not from its source, with the attention we would expect to the overall argument and context, but from an op-ed piece in the newspaper (e.g. 38ff, 112).

The central part of this book (chapters one through nine) is concerned with justifying the introductory question by arguing that the twentieth century has shown, in theory and especially in practice, that Marxism is a "crackpot idea" (120). Unfortunately Fernandez-Morera's scholarship stands as a model of meticulous precision in comparison with the reasoning of his argument, which follows what I'll call the *Weird Sisters'* model. The procedure is to homogenize all forms and manifestations of Marxism, socialism, and generally leftist thought and practice from whatever period, along with Nazism and Fascism for good effect, into a single witch's brew labeled "materialist discourse." Fernandez-Morera gives "materialist discourse" two primary attributes: a relativist epistemology and a coercive collectivist politics, which he sees as corollary. These are the real issues that trouble him, but in each case the argument begins and ends with a simplistic polarization: epistemologically between facts and perceptions, and politically between collectivism and individualism. Defense of the objectivity of facts and the interests of individuals is good; consideration of the role of perceptions and the interests of collectivities is bad. There is nothing in between, no spectrum, no nuance; there are just two camps. Which camp is the good one ought to be self-evident, because "materialist discourse" inevitably leads to totalitarian horror. But all those professors, nefarious or naive, bewitch us with "materialist discourse" and "camouflage" the "links between the discourse and its historical effects" (5).

In his relatively brief discussion of literature and visual art, literature professor Fernandez-Morera neglects the extensive scholarly work relevant to his topic and focuses instead on a few anecdotes, suggesting, again, that he is addressing primarily a largely non-scholarly audience. His rejection of ideological analysis of the arts reflects with admirable consistency the ideological assumptions implicit in his discussions of politics and ethics. Great books are great simply because they are, he says, great; they must be, people have read them for centuries. The notions that personal values enter and have always entered into people's responses to books, that personal and communal values have

influenced what literature is published (or what scientific research is funded), or that recognition of such values may enrich our understanding of works: such ideas, commonsensical though they seem, are in fact strains of the sirens' song of "materialist discourse," which will lure us to totalitarian horror if we do not block our ears.

Fernandez-Morera deals with important issues. Should he choose in future work, through a more specifically focused engagement with authors he opposes, to bring his passion to bear on the epistemological questions that are perceived as crucial in so many disciplines today, he may make a useful contribution to the intellectual dialogue. Essential preparation for such an effort would be the development of his own position. The most serious shortcoming of *American Academia and the Survival of Marxist Ideas* is the author's failure to develop or even to summarize the foundations of his own position. There is no positive argument here. Instead Fernandez-Morera wages a kind of guerrilla effort, as from an unlocated position on the misty heath he stirs up trouble for those who seem threatening to him. Frequent references to Hayek and von Mises permit us to guess the general area he is operating from, but if he is to engage rationally and constructively with the important issues that concern him, all that—what he's for and what he's against—will need much clearer definition. The present book stands as a useful object lesson on the importance of precision in intellectual discourse.

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