

A BRIEF HISTORY

Radical Philosophy is a British philosophical journal of the left. It was founded in 1972. It probably has a larger active readership than any other philosophical journal in Britain. It circulates throughout the English-speaking world and in many other countries. The journal also organises a regular programme of conferences and meetings. Material from the journal has been widely discussed and reprinted. Two anthologies of articles from the journal have so far been published.[1]

Radical Philosophy was born in the aftermath of the student movement of the 1960s. At that time, philosophy in British universities was very conservative and traditional. Ordinary language philosophy, the analytical approach, and the empiricist tradition were absolutely dominant. However, the student movement of the 1960s had opened young people's minds to a whole new range of radical ideas and issues. These were dismissed as not worthy of study, and excluded from discussion in philosophy departments.

The journal was formed by a group of young teachers and graduate students of philosophy and related disciplines. Its purpose was to provide a forum where these ideas could be expressed and discussed, to bring together people interested in them; and to press for the reform and democratisation of philosophy in Britain. Its editorial policy is based upon the following principles

1. Radical Philosophy is explicitly a philosophical journal. From the outset, however, one of its main aims has been to combat the narrow conception of the subject which has dominated British philosophy. It has thus tried to link discussion in philosophy with theoretical work in other fields (particularly sociology, psychology, politics, history, and literary studies).
2. It is also explicitly a journal of the left. However, it has never been tied to any political party or group. Although it acknowledges the central importance of Marxism to radical thought, it has always included other currents of thought which have significantly contributed to the radical movement. Its aim has been to provide a forum for debate, and not to lay down a particular political or philosophical line.
3. Its articles are designed to be read by students. It has tried to avoid the obscure and abstract style of much recent philosophy in both the analytical and continental traditions.

The journal was an immediate success. Its first issue sold out rapidly and had to be reprinted twice. Its success inspired the formation of radical subject-based journals and groups in a number of other fields. The history of the journal reflects theoretical developments on the left during the last 20 years. When the magazine began, in the early 1970s, the main interest was in the following areas.

1. Marx and the Marxist tradition. This was then an unknown body of work to most philosophers in the English-speaking world. Discussion at this time was particularly

focused on the concept of alienation and the ideas of Socialist Humanists, such as Sartre and Kolakowski.

2. Radical currents of European philosophy: particularly existentialism (Sartre) and the Frankfurt school (Marcuse, Habermas).

3. Radical ideas arising out of psychoanalysis (Marcuse, R.D. Laing).

By the mid 1970s some distinctive tendencies began to emerge within Radical Philosophy itself. Perhaps the most influential school of thought associated with the journal has been a form of epistemological realism. A number of writers developed a realist theory of knowledge and philosophy of science, and showed how it can provide a method in the social sciences.[2]

Dialectic and the concept of contradiction was another major topic of debate in the 1970s. Controversy focused on the relation of the dialectical and formal logical concepts of contradiction, and on whether there can be a dialectic of nature.[3] Interest in these topics reflected a revival of interest in Hegel and his influence on Marx. A group of Hegelian Marxist writers have been closely associated with Radical Philosophy.[4]

The most important philosophical influence on the left in Britain in the 1970s was the structural Marxism of Althusser and his associates. The dogmatic and obscure style of these writers and their British followers was never congenial to Radical Philosophy; and the journal was never a main locus for structuralist writing. However, it did carry important discussions of this work, both for and against.[5]

By the end of the 1970s, structuralist Marxism had run its course, and its influence declined rapidly. Many of its followers abandoned Marxism altogether and adopted various forms of post-structuralism and postmodernism influenced by Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida. This outlook is characterised by a radical scepticism, relativism and subjectivism.

Again, Radical Philosophy has not been a main centre for such views, but as their influence has grown they have been increasingly discussed in the journal. Moreover, these currents of thought have led to a revival of interest in Nietzsche and Heidegger, which, in recent years, has been increasingly reflected in the journal. Contributors have been divided in their responses to postmodernism. Some maintain that it is a radical perspective, which shows how traditional western ideas about knowledge, moral values, human nature and the self, are socially constructed and relative. It thus questions and undermines the most fundamental assumptions of traditional Enlightenment philosophy. Others, however, criticise it as an negative, nihilistic and ultimately incoherent approach which is destructive of any positive thought or action.

With the coming to power of Mrs Thatcher and President Reagan at the end of the 1970s, there was a dramatic shift to the right in the western world. This led to a long running

crisis on the left. Out of this has gradually emerged a new set of issues, which has formed the agenda for debate right up to the present.

The left in Britain has always been centred around the Labour Party. At the beginning of the 1980s, the Labour Party was a democratic socialist party of a very traditional kind. It has always been particularly strongly linked with the Trade Union movement; and it regarded itself as a party of the industrial working class. It advocated nationalisation of major areas of the economy and a strong welfare state.

The success of Thatcherism forced a rethinking of many of these policies. Throughout the 1980s the most dynamic forces on the left emerged outside the Labour Party and other traditional socialist political groups. The most important have been the women's movement, the peace movement and the environmental movement. Many see a coalition of these 'new social movements' – a 'rainbow alliance' – as the basis for the regeneration of the left. All these movements have given rise to important philosophical debates. These have provided the main focus of work in Radical Philosophy in recent years.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The women's movement has given rise to an enormous amount of philosophical debate, and this has been strongly featured in the journal. Some of this work has involved the critical reassessment of the history of philosophy from a feminist perspective. Others have been rethinking basic philosophical issues in feminist terms. Is there a distinctively feminist approach to ethics, epistemology and other traditional areas of philosophy? Do women and men differ by nature in such a way as to suit them for different social roles; or are the manifest differences between the sexes due merely to upbringing and social conditioning? Should women seek social and economic equality, and equality with men in the public realm; or should they assert their difference, and defend a separate sphere of activity? These are some of the many issues which are currently being discussed.[6] THE

PEACE MOVEMENT

The Peace Movement grew rapidly in the mid 1980s, as Cold War tensions increased and nuclear war seemed immanent. There were discussions about the morality of war in general, and nuclear war in particular, and debates about the idea of a 'just war'. However, with the relaxation of international tension in Europe, the Peace Movement has now declined and with it the discussion of these issues. THE GREEN MOVEMENT

Recent years have seen a greatly increased concern about pollution and the destruction of the environment. Protection of the environment has become a major political issue, and given rise to a variety of philosophical debates. What is the value of the environment? Should it be regarded merely as a means to the satisfaction of human needs, or as an end in itself? What is the nature of our relation to the environment? In what sense are human beings a part of, and in what sense are they distinct from the rest of nature? Is capitalism the main cause of environmental destruction; or are economic development and industrialism per se to blame?[7] In relation to all these movements, a central issue is

whether their aims can be met within the framework of traditional socialist working class politics, or whether they imply a critique and rejection of such politics. Some argue that the rise of these movements requires the rejection of the traditional socialist approach; others that their aims can ultimately be realised only by the elimination of production for profit and the creation of a socialist society.

A new dimension to these arguments about the viability of traditional socialist politics has been added by the recent changes in the socialist world. Some maintain that Marxism has been finally refuted and discredited by these events. At the opposite extreme, others maintain that actually existing socialism has been quite different from Marx's idea of socialism; and so its demise has no relevance to Marxism. A third position is that the crisis in the socialist world necessitates a fundamental rethinking of Marxism. This debate has only just been started in the journal; but will no doubt become increasingly vigorous.

ASSESSMENT AND PROSPECT

Radical Philosophy is now almost 20 years old. In that time philosophy in Britain has changed greatly. Much of what was originally demanded by Radical Philosophy has been achieved. Marxism, continental philosophy, and psychoanalysis are now respectable subjects of study in most British universities. Slowly and cautiously, analytical philosophy has also changed. There has been a renewed interest in social and political philosophy among analytical philosophers. Indeed, since the mid 1970s, a distinctive school of analytical Marxism has emerged. This has been the subject of critical discussion in Radical Philosophy.[8] Some attempts have also been made by analytical philosophers to initiate a dialogue across the gulf which still divides analytical and continental philosophy. Radical Philosophy has played some part in bringing about these changes in British philosophy. However, it would be a wrong to claim too much credit. The main impetus for change came from the radicalism of the 1960s; and Radical Philosophy merely responded to intellectual and political currents which already existed. The changes for which Radical Philosophy has fought are by no means all achieved; and there is still an important role for the journal to perform.

NOTES

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R. Edgley, 'Science, Social Science and Socialist Science: Reason as Dialectic', Radical Philosophy 15 (Autumn 1976); R. Norman, 'Dialectic', Radical Philosophy 14 (Summer 1976) and S. Sayers, 'On the Marxist Dialectic', Radical Philosophy 14 (Summer 1976) (both the latter reprinted in R. Norman and S. Sayers, Hegel, Marx and Dialectic: A Debate, Harvester, Brighton, 1980; Gregg Revivals, 1994). go back

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J. Grimshaw, 'Mary Wollstonecraft and the Tensions in Feminist Philosophy', Radical Philosophy 52 (Summer 1989) (SFP); V. Plumwood, 'The Sex/Gender Distinction', Radical Philosophy 51 (Spring 1989); S. Parsons, 'Feminism and the Logic of Morality', Radical Philosophy 47 (Autumn 1987) (SFP); R. Poole, 'Morality, Masculinity and the Market', Radical Philosophy 39 (Spring 1985) (SFP). go back

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