

# Directions in English Marxist Criticism

## ——An Interview with David Margolies

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**Abstract:** David Margolies, who retired from Goldsmiths, University of London, is an important Marxist in Great Britain. He is famous for his study of Caudwell. I invited him to come to Zhejiang University and give lectures on Tragedy this March. During his visit, I did an interview with him and we talked about a series of issues, including new directions in English Marxist criticism.

**Key words:** Marxism; Marxist Criticism; Terry Eagleton; Caudwell

**Wang Jie:** I' ve done a series of interviews with scholars from oversea countries since 2008, to discuss important theoretical issues with overseas scientists and introduce them to Chinese scholars. I' ve done 20 or 30 interviews with well-known scholars so far. I want to keep this work. Most of the interviews were published on our Journal. This book is kept in over 2000 libraries, including Cambridge University library and Oxford University library. Some interviews were published in English. Some of them were translated into Chinese and published in famous and top journals. I' m also planning to edit a book with all these interviews, as they are quite influential in Chinese academic arena, maybe next year. This year we' ll celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx' s birth, so we have lots of activities, such as conferences related to Marx' s work. I' m wondering what kind of activities will be held in Britain. As we know, Marx spent quite a long time in UK and British scholars have made great achievements in Marxist studies. We Chinese scientists are quite interested in that.

**Prof. David Margolies** (hereafter to be referred as Margolies): There is a day-conference at Marx Memorial Library, on the birthday. I don' t know any others. There may be, I expect to hear. There is an annual Marx lecture at Marx' s tomb-in Highgate Cemetery. I think probably they are more serious this year about Marx on

the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth.

**Wang Jie:** There will be some memorial programs on China Central Television. Central China Normal University will host a conference on Marxism. I remember there was a film director presented on the 1<sup>st</sup> Forum on Marxist Aesthetics. He made a documentary with some famous Marxists, such as Žižek and Eagleton. He interviewed them about their opinions on Marxism. I am also very interested in that practice. We may do that in the future.

Would you introduce some new scholars, tendencies, interests and publications of Marxism in Britain?

**Margolies:** I don't keep up with everything. As you might expect, there are lots of different trends. Some of them are contradictory. There are regular classes in Marxism at Marx Memorial Library. The full title is Marx Memorial Library and Workers' School. It was set up in 1933, when the Nazis started to burn books, to make sure that Marxism survived. It went through a long fairly dormant period in the early part of this century, and now it has become active again. The classes get a fair number of trade unionists to them. Some of them are direct contacted with the students coming to library, but usually there is also an online version, so they have a number of students doing the courses online.

**Wang Jie:** According to my own experience in Manchester, study of Marxism is quite active and fruitful in Britain, and has such a long history.

**Margolies:** I don't want to make it sound like Marx Library is a big institution. No. It's a small building. It's a nice building. It has a lot of books and archives; it's got things that are very important. But it's not big, and its membership is not huge. Its importance at the moment, aside from the teaching, seems to be its benefit from the collections. And it's got the best collection of Spanish Civil War material outside Spain.

If we are talking about tendencies of Marxism, these usually appear in political movements and organizations rather than simply as abstract and philosophical approaches. In terms of philosophical tendencies, in London there are regular lectures from the historical materialism society. And there are different study

groups on Marxism in different universities. I don't know how many people attend them but the interest is certainly there. I think one of the things that restored the interest was the Financial Crash of 2008 where there were many cartoons with Marx laughing and so on.

**Wang Jie:** Are there any other well-known new Marxist theorists, other than Žižek and Eagleton? Either in general Marxism and culture studies, literature studies in specific.

**Margolies:** David McClellan is probably the most respected Marxist among other Marxists, but he is not a celebrity. Terry Eagleton, I think, is not considered important as a Marxist. His importance is as a literary critic and as someone who has made it possible to talk about Marxism. There are others who are not Marxists but who are interested in Marxism and keep Marxism part of current discussion. But it must also be recognized that in Britain the important contributors to the development of Marxism have usually been people who used Marxism in another specific field. So, for instance, Alick West and Arnold Kettle were outstanding Marxists in their writing about literature; they used Marxism to explain literature, and although they didn't write theory directly, it clearly informed their work and readers could learn a lot about Marxism from their work.

There are others who appeal to people interested in Marxism but primarily in terms of their own academic field. This is particularly true of many of the French theorists around Althusser (who did write theory) like Lacan in terms of psychoanalysis and Derrida in literature.

**Wang Jie:** what do you think about Eagleton?

**Margolies:** I like some of Eagleton's work. He was very important because his lectures were dynamic and he dealt things that related to people's experience. He gave them an entrance to Marxism. He always warned his enthusiastic followers that just having revolutionary theory would not change the world; they had to engage with real life. That was good Marxism. But he seems himself no longer to be active in actual politics. Students in universities may learn Marxist theory but not become active. They are not changing the world.

**Wang Jie:** Yes, not changing the world. It' s quite important. They hope to change the world.

**Margolies:** But hope is not enough. There has to be practice.

**Wang Jie:** How do you think about Žižek.

**Margolies:** He seems to be everywhere. He makes very good, provocative remarks that make people think and question what is happening. I haven' t studied him so I can' t make a judgment of his theory. But I know that, after Eagleton, he is probably the Marxist with the most public exposure. His face and name are known by people. People increasingly appreciate questioning. People asked why the 2008 financial collapse happened and their questioning began to enter other areas. For example, economics students in the University of Manchester had something like a strike; they were demanding to be taught a wider range of economic theories, not just the theories that caused the financial collapse. Žižek helps people realize that there is something fundamentally wrong with the way western countries are organized.

**Wang Jie:** I think Terry Eagleton and Žižek are getting old. Who are the new and young important Marxists today about culture study and Marxist aesthetics in Britain?

**Margolies:** I don' t recognize any one person who has that role on this point. But it' s not just new critics; there are neglected thinkers who are coming back into discussion. I' m thinking particularly of Caudwell.

**Wang Jie:** Ok, we will talk about Caudwell later. There is a saying that Engels is more important than Marx in aesthetic study. What do you think?

**Margolies:** I don' t think it' s a meaningful distinction. Engels in his correspondence probably said more about literature than Marx, and Marx' s appreciation of literature was rather conventional but with the addition of a political awareness. His admiration of Shakespeare' s *Timon of Athens* for its image of how gold destroys social order is very like the image of capitalism in the *Manifesto*. But he is not particularly interested in analysis of literature; his interest in the construction of ideology is where his importance to literature lies. This was the result of Marx and Engels working together; neither of them doubts that

literature can be significant. Both were critical of reductive views and, unlike many politically committed people since then, they recognized that a good political position is not sufficient to ensure good literature.

**Wang Jie:** Would you please introduce your research experience, interests and theoretical opinions? So Chinese scholars can know more about you.

**Margolies:** Ok. My research in the last few decades has been largely in the area of Shakespeare. In school and university I avoided Shakespeare as much as possible because it was always presented as something “good for you”. I came to Shakespeare only after working on the fiction of the period, something that attracted me because of the directness with which authors addressed an audience. And the readership was understood as audience rather than isolated readers, so it had a social aspect which was missing in the Shakespeare-as-genius approach. This was the material that Shakespeare himself read, and my experience of it meant that when I studied Shakespeare because I had to teach the plays, I understood them from an entirely different perspective. I appreciated Shakespeare as a dramatist for the people, as an entertainer, and as a radical critic of the early stages of capitalism.

In the 1970s I was teaching in an American university and was denied tenure. I was unable to get another university job, I needed to earn money and took a job in the furniture trade. That experience, which lasted only until I managed to get a teaching job in England, led me to an understanding of Marx that study alone could not provide. The importance of practice increased enormously in my estimation.

**Wang Jie:** I heard you just edited and published a selected works of Caudwell. In your opinion, what is the significance and meaning of Caudwell’s research for contemporary Marxist Aesthetics?

**Margolies:** As you know, Caudwell was incredibly widely read and his importance for Marxism must not be considered in a narrow sense of aesthetics. Basically he dealt with the relation between social organization and consciousness——both historically and in the current situation. Traditional Marxist criticism looks at the way society shapes literature——and the importance of that work cannot be denied. But does literature not do anything itself? That is where Caudwell comes in and is

particularly original and outstandingly Marxist. Literature, and cultural products in general, react back on the society in which they are produced, encouraging attitudes, perhaps presenting conflicting attitudes and also consolidating different attitudes. The relationship between the environment and cultural products is dialectical. A simple example is Caudwell's treatment of Marlowe. He says that Marlowe's plays reflect the thrusting individualism of primitive capitalism in the age of Shakespeare—something that is now almost taken for granted—and he argues that Marlowe's presentation of that individualism also makes it attractive and in effect says that individualism is not only acceptable but natural and even heroic. This is an escape from feudal consciousness and can facilitate bringing in the new system.

**Wang Jie:** I learned a lot from Caudwell's work when I did my PhD thesis. Could you please introduce the relation between his ideas and that of Marx and Engels?

**Margolies:** Marx and Engels wanted to change the world, and their theoretical work was part of that. Caudwell believed that they offered the best tool for creating that change and it became the framework for all his own work. Theoretically it meant that he saw everything as active, in motion. Motion is inherent in dialectic. His concern with the real world, with actuality, is also something he shares with Marx and Engels.

**Wang Jie:** What would you say about his death during the war in Spain?

**Margolies:** In one sense his death was clearly a tragic waste, and there is a common argument that the Communist Party should have preserved its best intellectuals. But, as someone with considerable mechanical skill (a pilot and inventor), he could make a considerable contribution to the International Brigades. He became a machine gun instructor as soon as he began his training. There was also a hope or belief that the policy of non-intervention, which starved the government of all resources, not just munitions, might be dropped, and if that were the case, then the Republic could win. As a believer in action and as a committed Communist, it was entirely consistent for him to go to Spain. And it should be pointed out that his death was heroic: he died at his machine gun, covering the retreat of his company.

**Wang Jie:** In terms of modern tragedy, do you know any British Marxist theorists who make contributions to that topic?

**Margolies:** Well, Terry Eagleton wrote a play about Ireland, but that's all I know about it. Aside from Raymond Williams, there is John Arden who was both playwright and critic. Arnold Wesker, Edward Bond and Howard Barker have written many plays and also on tragedy, but I don't know if they would be qualified as Marxists. Probably the most significant radical playwrights are the late Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill but I don't know if they have written anything theoretical and might not call themselves Marxists.

**Wang Jie:** Do you like Chinese films? Do you want to talk about Chinese films that you think are important?

**Margolies:** Chinese films have little general distribution in Britain. I have seen very few. But I've now got a number of DVDs so I'm starting to watch more.

**Wang Jie:** *Tale of the White Snake* is a Chinese tragedy. Would you like to say something about it?

**Margolies:** I knew nothing about this folk legend until I was given an interpretation of the excellent sculpture in Leifeng Pagoda. So my sense of it is certainly superficial. But it seems to emphasize justice and endurance in a very concrete and personal way. I think that folk narratives are an important cultural reservoir for interpreting and contextualizing individual behavior. They provide norms of behavior that are more friendly than rules and certainly more interesting.

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