

THE RECOVERY OF WESTERN MARXISM

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I am uncertain what are the rights of an author who believes himself mistreated by a reviewer. I had my say in a book; Rosaire Langlois had his in a review. What can several additional pages contribute if my book as a whole failed to convince? Nevertheless, Langlois appeals to the "innocent bystanders", and perhaps to them I can indicate that the issues are not arcane or insular but directly bear on the Marxist project.

I argued in my book *Dialectic of Defeat* that political successes regularly renewed the attractiveness of an orthodox Marxism and Leninism. From the Russian and Chinese Revolutions to the French and Italian Communist Parties, and Third World Movements, an orthodoxy has proved effective; it works guiding revolutions and political parties. Next to these successes, a Western dissident Marxism encompassing theorists from Rosa Luxemburg and Georg Lukács to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Herbert Marcuse can claim few victories; its history is beset by defeats and reverses.

Yet a critical distance from the "facts" characterizes Marxism—or should characterize it. Marxists do not accept facts "as is", but trace the facts to the factors—human and social forces. Before the facts of success and defeat, however, this critical distance has often vaporized. Marxists have embraced success and spurned defeats, as if neither category required further scrutiny. It seems to me that this fetish of success has crippled Marxism. Marxists have chased after success like stockbrokers; they want winners and performers. Beginning with the German Social Democrats the fact of Marxist political power has silenced Marxist critics who had only theories, not power.

The record, I believe, is relatively clear; the fetish of success succumbed to the facts, and has been betrayed by them. Not only are yesterday's successes today's defeats—where are the current legions of Maoists?—but the effort of European and North American Marxists to replicate Soviet and Chinese successes has proved politically and theoretically disastrous. The grim record of the 'successful' orthodoxy calls for a sympathetic reappraisal of the defeated traditions. If success cannot be accepted as a blank fact, neither can defeat. In the end the accumulated experiences and theories of defeated Marxism may prove more significant than those of victorious Marxism.

These considerations inform my study which seeks to retrieve a defeated Western Marxism. Langlois represents a polar, and indeed historically dominant tradition; he calls it variously "scientific socialism", or "determinist" and "evolutionary" Marxism. He explicitly defends "old-fashioned" Marxism; and he asks whether Western Marxism with its attention to culture and subjectivity has not "compromised" the "uniqueness" and "coherence" of "classical Marxism".

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What coherence? The mythical coherence of classical Marxism, partly propagated by Perry Anderson in his *Considerations On Western Marxism*, soothes the orthodox;¹ they can contentedly denounce Western Marxists as shirkers unfit for the rigors of the real theory. This original coherence is a half-truth. In addition, if the old doctrine was so compelling and complete, why did Western Marxism ever emerge? I suspect that Langlois has an explanation, since in a brief review he cites Lewis Feuer four times; and he suggests that "any" understanding of Western Marxism must confront his intemperate thirteen-page essay "Neo-Primitivism: The New Marxism of the Alienated Intellectuals"—a fantastic suggestion. Feuer seems like an odd ally in the quest for scientific Marxism since he has denounced every Marxist advance as a conspiracy of intellectuals, barbarians and adolescents.² On reconsideration, he is a perfect ally.

The real issue, however, is not that we represent divergent, perhaps antagonistic Marxisms, but the underlying historical judgments. I do not think that after a century the record of orthodox Marxism on its home turf—Western Europe and North America—is impressive or that its record anywhere is pretty; for the advanced industrial countries Western Marxism offers a political and theoretical alternative. Langlois reverses these judgments. He sniffs "it would not do to be entirely dismissive of the [Western Marxist] tradition" as if only his good breeding prevents him from dismissing it outright. From his condominium high in the tower of Marxism the junkyard of orthodoxy looks like a lovely park. After "more than a decade" of Western Marxism he thinks it is time to return to Marxism as a "real and positive science"—a tradition as old as Engel's *Anti-Dühring*.

To sweeten this return, he mentions the contributions of Karl Wittfogel, Marvin Harris, Lewis Feuer and, vaguely, recent sociological literature, as proving the value of the old mines. For these we should dismiss—not entirely!"—Western Marxism. To cast my net widely, this includes the works deriving from Lukács, Gramsci and Korsch; the circles around Merleau-Ponty and Sartre; the individuals who collected about the journals *Arguments* in France and *Praxis* in Yugoslavia; the literary criticism that has flowed from Walter Benjamin; the writings of the Frankfurt School from T.W. Adorno to Franz Neumann and Jürgen Habermas; the radical psychoanalysis of Erich Fromm and Wilhelm Reich; the historical writings associated with E.P. Thompson, Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman; and the list could be extended. Langlois dismisses this vital Marxism in order to roll out the carpet for Wittfogel, Feuer and determinist Marxism. He calls the attention to Western Marxism a disappointing infatuation with "la belle dame", while he settles down for another century of waiting for Godot.

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Notes

1. To his credit Perry Anderson retracts some of his claims about classical Marxism in his Afterword; see his *Consideration On Western Marxism* (London, 1976), pp. 109 ff. See my review of his *Arguments Within English Marxism in Theory and Society*, XI/2 (March 1982), pp. 251-257.
2. Langlois also warmly recommends Feuer's "The Preconceptions of Critical Theory" [*Jewish Journal of Sociology*, XVI (1974), pp. 75-84] as indicating problems of Western Marxism. In this essay Feuer argues or, rather, phantasizes that the Frankfurt School's critical theory was a product of infantile wishes. "The Critical Theorists, as if in a child's perpetual temper tantrum, always rebuking the father, made a fetish of 'no' and the Great Refusal," (p. 84). According to Feuer they irrationally hated business but never knew "the feeling in businessmen... that commerce and industry were domains in which a man's freedom and initiative could express themselves" (p. 80). Feuer, who wondered why the Critical Theorists did not apply their psychoanalytic talents to analyzing their own obsession with negation, might want to analyze his own obsession with the Frankfurt School; it was expressed most recently in his "The Frankfurt Marxists and the Columbia Liberals", [*Survey*, XXV, (Summer, 1980) pp. 156-176], a desperate attempt to show that the Critical Theorists duped Columbia University.