

THE POLITICS OF WESTERN MARXISM: REFLECTIONS*

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The "Politics of Western Marxism" sounds redundant, as if Marxism itself does not imply a politics. Yet today any reflections on Marxism must recognize its fractured condition; political, philosophical and economic pieces do not fit together. National forms of Marxism offer contending versions of basic events and texts. Marxist scholarship itself has long succumbed to the intellectual division of labor, fragmenting into fields, subfields and sometimes boutiques. Marxist psychoanalysts and Marxist economists cannot communicate; a common vocabulary and experience belong to the past.

Marxism has emphatically devolved into a plural, Marxisms, with scores of warring varieties; many are poisonous. To admit this does not damn the whole Marxist enterprise. Liberal capitalism tolerated, and tolerates, slavery, apartheid, authoritarianism and global starvation, and few suggest that these suffice to junk it.

Yet the regular misdeeds of Marxism cannot be written off as inevitable but deplorable; nor can they be neatly attributed to a hostile environment or billed against all Marxists, a Rosa Luxemburg as well as a Joseph Stalin. At the very least they require a careful sifting of the distinct strands of Marxism. Marx's remark that "history" does nothing — it is particular individuals in particular circumstances who act — must be applied to Marxism itself. "Marxism" does nothing; it is particular Marxists who act in particular circumstances.

Nevertheless, microscopic studies of malignant forms of Marxism may forget the larger issues. Politics cannot be isolated and delivered to appropriate experts, as if politics were of no concern to the Marxist philosophers or sociologists. A political project belongs to the heart and soul of Marxism; and if it is continually adjourned, ignored or relegated to specialists, even the smallest Marxist field suffers. The malaise that afflicts much Western Marxist scholarship derives from the loss of political vitality.

This is not an individual failing or the failing of many individuals. Radical politics seem stalled; they belong to the past or only fleetingly to the present. The sporadic politics of nuclear freeze or ecology do not sustain a Marxist academic superstructure. Yet without a living contact with radical politics, Marxist studies turn arid. Scholars elaborate the relationship of Marx to Hegel or advance post-structural textual methods, but without a political echo, even the participants begin to wonder: what is the point?

* These reflections are based on my book, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and a paper delivered to a Vancouver symposium in Spring 1983 sponsored by the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*.

This reality cannot be revoked at will; and Western Marxism itself offers no ten-day course to a more satisfying and political Marxism. Indeed theoretical guardians of rigorous Marxism have regularly charged that Western Marxists — T. W. Adorno or Herbert Marcuse — fled from practical politics into romanticism, utopianism and other infantile disorders. Perhaps this charge can be turned upside down; for today the tradition of narrow political Marxism does not even offer a compelling politic. Politics without philosophy, perhaps without utopianism, takes its revenge by reducing politics to hucksterism. "We sold the World Revolution like vacuum cleaners," recalled Arthur Koestler of his Communist Party canvassing days.

The utopianism of Western Marxism proves closer to the political realities, and perhaps popular and secret longings, than the no-nonsense of scientific Marxism, which is petrified in a double sense: it has calcified into dogma and it is frightened of emancipation. Even the editors of *New Left Review*, who have done so much both to introduce (to the Anglo-American world) and to elegantly write off Western Marxism, have recently reconsidered their position. "The resources of that utopianism [of the early Marx and early socialists] will need to be drawn upon and developed again," they write, "if socialism is to confront with any realism the universal threat of a military explosion that would annihilate every class." They suggest that the "romantic" moment of Marxism will have to be re-evaluated. "This task, involving as it does a rethinking of values as well of analyses, has lain largely neglected these past years. *New Left Review* shared that neglect, perhaps in its case with more responsibility than others bore."¹

In the last years of the 19th century, Western Marxism began assuming an identity by diverging from the dominant orthodox Marxism. Italian theorists, who remained drenched in a Hegelian tradition, did much of the philosophical spadework. Returning to Feuerbach and the early Marx, Giovanni Gentile, Rodolfo Mondolfo and Antonio Labriola challenged a positivist Marxism; and they revived concepts of subjectivity and philosophical critique. While Lukács is usually named as the first to broach the issue of Engels' distortion of Marx, the credit belongs to the Italian socialists. Indeed if discrete ideas can be plotted, it seems likely that Lukács picked up this heretical idea from his Hungarian teacher, Ervin Szabó, who had already discussed it. Szabó, a syndicalist, corresponded with another syndicalist, Georges Sorel, who also criticized Engels' Marxism. Finally, Sorel maintained a long association with Benedetto Croce and Gentile, where the discussion of Engels seems to have originated.

The philosophical allegiances of Western Marxism to Hegel, subjectivity and the critique of ideology seem to lack political impact; yet in the flush of the Russian Revolution they infused 'left' Communism, the premiere challenge to orthodox Leninism. Philosophy informed the political idiom. In these years a political *and* philosophical Western Marxism coalesced both to address the distinct imperatives of Western Europe and to resist the universal claims of Soviet Marxism. Dutch 'leftists' such as Hermann Gorter and Anton Pannekoek became prominent theoretical leaders of this project. As Gorter explained, this

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was not mysterious. Insofar as Western Marxism responded to the realities of mature capitalism, it was natural that intellectuals of the oldest bourgeois nation — Holland — should pioneer in its elaboration.

Western Marxism is the Marxism of advanced capitalism; this cannot be overstated. The first Western Marxists claimed that Soviet Marxism, a Marxism of pre-capitalism, minimized the cultural specificity of Western Europe. Gorter's "open letter" to Lenin charged that the realities of a Russian agrarian population undercut the Soviet appreciation of bourgeois hegemony. Similarly, Rosa Luxemburg noted that the authoritarian discipline that Lenin prescribed for the proletariat was in the West the disease, not the cure. For the Soviet Marxists industrialization and a disciplined work force belonged to the future.

Regardless of its theoretical coherency, Western Marxism did not obtain any political victories. The success of orthodox Leninism and the defeat of Western dissenters color 20th century Marxism. After the early 1920s Western Marxism contracts into a small cluster of marginal intellectuals, mavericks and journals. On the other hand, orthodox Marxism posts revolutions in Russia and China, and is represented by political parties in the West. The record speaks for itself.

Or does it? These facts must not be celebrated as commands of history. Little has more warped Marxism than its victory fetish. Historical losers are not automatically blessed by virtue of their defeat: nor are victors anointed by their success. Victory and defeat register a constellation of political forces; they are facts, not judgements. Marxists, least of all, should be unimpressed by the brutal facts of political power. Obviously, who or what party came to power is important, but it is only one of many issues; the victorious programs or theories do not imply universal truths. That a Victor Serge died forgotten in a Mexico City taxicab tells us nothing about the quality of his Marxism. Nor that another Marxist chaired a vast Communist Party confer truth to his theories.

Success is the opium of Marxists; and the habit is difficult to break. From the German Social Democrats of pre-World War I to the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, the bright light of success has dazzled generations of Marxists; it even infiltrates scholarly discourse. Statements by Marxists at leading universities inevitably receive more attention than statements by Marxists at community colleges. If this is reasonable, it is the reason of power; personal success transfers to theories the supposition of truth; lack of success suggests deficient theorizing. These associations, rarely articulated and regularly made, confound power and veracity.

To strip Marxism of its fetish of power and victory requires an historical eye sceptical of success. The reexamination must acknowledge what Marxists rehearse and ignore: vast disjunctions in the social conditions preclude universal theories. The legions of Maoists have long ago dissipated, but the lesson should not be lost. Maoism, a theory of national and peasant revolution, offered precious little to Marxists of advanced industrial society. When Maoists of New York and Paris knocked their heads against the walls, they broke their heads, not the walls.

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Yet the shadows that today fall upon Marxism are not simply dispelled by reconsidering the defeated; nor can the shadows be outrun. Advances in Marxist semiotics or post-structuralism may forget to elucidate the ills that have plagued the basic theory. To be sure, critics of Marxism are always in abundance, perhaps today more than ever. Many of the most searching critics are in fact ex-Marxists; Ignazio Silone once quipped that the final struggle will be between the communists and the ex-communists. Before ignoring these critics of Marxism, it should be recalled that at the end of his life Marx carefully studied Bakunin's vituperative attack on Marxism. The task for the present might be put this way: to extract the moment of truth from the critique of Marxism.

"The Gulag is not a blunder or an accident," Bernard-Henri Lévy has written, "not a simple wound or aftereffect of Stalinism; but [it is] the necessary corollary of a socialism which can only actualize homogeneity by driving the forces of heterogeneity back to its fringes, which can aim for the universal only by confining its rebels." ² If exaggerating, Lévy perceives the Marxist distrust of individual differences. Marxism loves systems, and suspects the unsystematic, the individual. Nor is this simply a philosophical preference; Marxism embraces economic rationalization. Here the ambivalent relationship of Marxism to capitalism surfaces. A Marxist socialism succeeds and "negates" capitalism; but elegant discussions of the Hegelian "negation" fail to do justice to the messy reality and its imperatives.

Marxists themselves have interpreted these imperatives in accord with their own economic situation. To industrialize and complete the work of capitalism comprised the first task for Marxists of the "underdeveloped" nations. For the Marxists of the "advanced" countries the task is less to complete than to restructure the economic relations. These two projects rarely converge.

Brecht once charged that Max Horkheimer feared that the masses might become too well-fed and well-sheltered. Brecht's misunderstanding is common (and in his case, willful). Within the "affluent" countries themselves, the urgent needs of the poor and unemployed damn theories of the culture industry to the chitchat of intellectuals. Nevertheless the either/or must be resisted; the point is not play philosophy against economics, culture against work or the psyche against production, as if the former dissolves into the latter. "It is ridiculous," wrote the master dialectician T. W. Adorno, "to reproach chewing gum for diminishing the propensity for metaphysics, but it could probably be shown that Wrigley's profits and his Chicago palace have their roots in the social function of reconciling people to bad conditions and thus diverting them from criticism. It is not that chewing gum undermines metaphysics but that it *is* metaphysics — this is what must be made clear." ³

Nevertheless, since the Russian Revolution the identification of Marxism with a costly industrialization is virtually complete; that the "successful" revolutions have only occurred in the pre- and semi-industrialized nations depleted Marxism of visions beyond enlarged production. For too many Marxists plans to industrialize displace dreams of emancipation, and, often enough, the dreams become nightmares. The imperative to rapidly attain a

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communist society cripples Marxism. "Our country's place in history will be assured," the Khmer Rouge leadership declared. "We will be the first nation to create a completely communist society without wasting time on intermediate steps." Wilfred Burchett has estimated the toll: "Enough documentation does exist to confirm that crimes almost without parallel in history were committed against their own people by the Khmer Rouge leadership." He calculates several million lives were lost, and adds, "All the people I had known during a quarter of century of regular contact with Cambodia have been killed." ⁴

Marxists must cease to worship at the altar of productivity, science and power; and the human and psychological contours of emancipation must be more than habitually acknowledged and ignored. Without the closest scrutiny, the colonialization of human needs within capitalism damns its successor, socialism, to mimicry. As Harry Madoff, who is grounded in an empirical Marxism distant from utopian speculation, recently stated, "A necessary condition for a truly communist society is a total departure from the culture of capitalism and consumerism. This would mean a *wholly* new approach to the design of cities and villages, transportation, location of industry, technology and much more. Above all, the new culture would have to be grounded in a view of people's needs and a way of life that would be consistent with the maintenance of a cooperative and egalitarian society." ⁵

The status of the proletariat itself requires rethinking, as André Gorz has provocatively argued in his *Farewell to the Working Class (Adieux au Proletariat)*. Nor is he alone. "Today, a hundred years after Marx's death, it is impossible to make out a reasonable case for the view which has been for so long at the very heart of Marxism, i.e. that the proletariat in the advanced capitalist countries is destined to be the agent of revolutionary change." ⁶ This is not the revisionist Gorz but the orthodox Paul Sweezy.

Gorz's *Farewell* is a good guide through the thicket of dead Marxist concepts. His language recalls Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, now 20 years old. "The negation of capital's negation of the worker has not taken place: there is no affirmation. We are left in a one-dimensional universe. In its struggle with capital, the proletariat takes on the identity capital has given it." ⁷ Or in more prosaic terms, "Capitalist development had endowed the collective worker with a structure that makes it impossible for real, flesh-and-blood workers either to recognize themselves in it, to identify with it or to internalize it as their own reality and potential power." ⁸

Gorz represents what might be called 'the counter-culture after the decline.' With few illusions, and less optimism, he suggests that liberation depends on enlarging the sphere of individual autonomy; and he associates himself with the ideas of Ivan Illich to partially detach individuals from a 'high-tech' consumer society. "There is therefore no point . . . in seeking to identify with laws imminent in historical development. We are not going anywhere: History has no meaning . . . No longer can we give ourselves to a transcendent cause, expecting that it will repay our suffering . . . We must, however, be clear about what we desire. The logic of capital has brought us to the threshold of liberation. But it

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can only be crossed at the price of a radical break, in which productionism is replaced by a different rationality."⁹ Freedom cannot arise out of the "material process" but only out of "free subjectivity."

Is this possible? Can the individual escape society or is the individual defined by resistance to society? The goal of "partial" freedom may be the key. We have entered the period of partial struggles; these contain universal implications such as nuclear disarmament, but in themselves they do not promise to revolutionize society. At best they obtain partial gains, a preservation of neighbourhood or a temporary halt in armaments. They provide breathing spaces, essential when the oxygen is running low.

These efforts suggest that one of the oldest chestnuts in the Marxist fire must be retrieved, the relationship of reform and revolution. Inasmuch as the scenario of revolution — the storming of the gates — no longer applies to the advanced industrial societies; and insofar as revolutionary forces are not within sight, then the radical impulses within reform must be restudied. Here the Western Marxist legacy is richest. Political victory does not exhaust, even define, revolution; rather the revolutionary impulses must inform tactics, as well as the lives of participants.

Although they have not denied its truth, Western Marxists from Lukács to Sartre have neglected political economy. Nevertheless, a Marxist political economy sustains much of their work. Indeed it has been argued that the most abstract of the Western Marxists, T. W. Adorno, remained orthodox in his allegiance to a Marxist political economy. For instance, his letters to Walter Benjamin, on the latter's Arcades project, often sound like an orthodox Marxist berating an erring revisionist. "The *specific* commodity character of the 19th century, in other words, the industrial production of commodities, would have to be worked out much more clearly and materially," he lectured Benjamin.¹⁰

Yet the political implications of the economic truths of Western Marxism remain vague. The crisis of capitalism can also lead to barbarism, not only revolution. This would hardly be news to Marx or Rosa Luxemburg. This theoretical possibility, however, became the dark reality for 20th century Marxists. Gorz argues that capitalism engenders not an "authentic" working class, but a "non-class" gravitates to authoritarianism as well as socialism. The truths of political economy are mute; they lead in too many political directions. This justifies a philosophical, a cultural or a psychoanalytic Marxism.

If political economy is mute, intellectuals are not. A striking change in the last twenty-five years is the proliferation of Marxist books, studies and journals. In the 1950s perhaps a handful of professors in North America publically identified with Marxism; new students did not emerge. Today just a survey of Marxist literature in several fields — see Bertell Ollman's *The Left Academy* — takes hundred of pages. Each discipline can boast journals, books and professors. The renaissance of Western Marxism itself is rooted in this new wave of students and professors.

The growth of Marxist studies promises to cure an ill that has plagued the left, especially in the United States, the loss of its history. The left in the United

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States has been unable to maintain a tradition and a literature. Since it must regularly relearn Marxism, it has remained vulnerable to demoralization and repression. No Marxist culture has been transmitted across generations which would help to avoid mistakes as well as to survive periods of retreat. The depth and breadth of Marxist studies in the university suggest that this will no longer be the case. Despite an unreceptive wider culture, Marxism will subsist in the academies; and when the social conditions unfreeze, a viable Marxist can intervene.

Perhaps. While the quantitative and qualitative growth of Marxist studies cannot be denied, a price in academization has been paid. Marxism threatens to become a series of academic fiefdoms almost indistinguishable from non-Marxist specialities. The problem is not the formation of a theoretical Marxism which is distant from praxis, as if we need a revival of textbook or agit-prop Marxism. The issue is that this theoretical Marxism has become technical, directed solely at colleagues; it has surrendered a public forum.

The price can be glimpsed in the transition from Marcuse to Habermas or C. Wright Mills (or Paul Baran) to more recent Marxist sociologists. The language and reference points have shifted. Although few would argue that Marcuse was easy to read, he as well as a Mills, a Sweezy, an Isaac Deutscher, and a generation of Western Marxists, wrote for an educated public. More recent Marxists in almost all fields — literary studies, philosophy of social science, sociology of world systems — turn their backs on outsiders. The point is not the value of the work, although this also can be questioned, but its insularity. It would be a final irony of Western Marxism. After decades on the margins of Marxism, it begins flourishing in the universities; and just as it is poised to enter a public arena an indecipherable lingo bewitches its tongue.

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Notes

1. *New Left Review* Foreword to Edward Thompson, et al, *Exterminism and Cold War*, London: Verso Editions, pp. viii-ix.
2. Bernard-Henri Levy, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, New York: Harper & Row, 1980, p. 158.
3. T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by S. & S. Weber, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 109.
4. Wilfred Burchett, *The China Cambodia Vietnam Triangle*, Chicago: Vanguard Books, 1981, pp. 109, 3.
5. Harry Magdoff, "The Meaning of Work," *Monthly Review*, 34:5 (October, 1982), p. 14.
6. Paul Sweezy, "Marxism and Revolution 100 years after Marx," *Monthly Review*, 34:10 (March, 1983), p. 6.
7. André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*, Boston, South End Press, 1982, p. 39.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 73-4.
10. T.W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin (2 August, 1935) in Ernst Bloch, et al, *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: NLB, 1977, p. 114.