

## "IMAGINARY MARXISMS" VERSUS CULTURAL MATERIALISM\*

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Russell Jacoby's criticisms of my review of his recent work provide little reason for me to modify my position, all the while curiously attributing to me views that I do not hold.

I am unrepentant in my view that Jacoby's concept of the "dialectic of defeat" is of little help in understanding the dynamics of success and failure in the socialist movement. Jacoby would have it that Marxists in the West have made a "fetish of success" and that the effort "to replicate Soviet and Chinese successes has proven politically and theoretically disastrous". Such a notion overlooks the concrete socio-economic factors that played a greater role in assuring the success or failure of the theories of Kautsky, Bernstein, Lukács, Luxemburg in varied environments.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, to put the matter bluntly and at the risk of some very considerable oversimplification, the "grim record" of socialism in the West has almost certainly much more to do with fact that capitalism had not — and has not — as yet reached the limits of its enormously productive potential, and precious little to do with the acceptance or rejection of Soviet or Chinese or "Western Marxist" political strategies by left-wing parties and splinter groups. Even non-Marxist social democratic parties have hardly met with universal success. Neither orthodox Communists nor "Western Marxist" theoreticians had a grasp of the real situation. As Coser has written of Rosa Luxemburg: "she thought that she represented the vanguard of the European proletariat, while in fact, the alleged renegade Bernstein had a better grasp of the shape of things to come".<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, Jacoby supposes that, at some time in the future, the "experience and theories of a defeated Marxism" — from Rosa Luxemburg to Marcuse — may yet prove more significant than those of a "victorious Marxism". Although this may seem "clear" and uncontroversial to Jacoby, an example may suggest how doubtful it is. While Jacoby provides no basis to suppose that serious social change is imminent, there are some indications that in the decades to come capitalism — under the twin impact of the creation of new productive forces (computer technology and its potential for social dislocation)<sup>3</sup> as well as the destruction of old productive forces (environmental degradation, resource depletion) — may well reach its ecosystemic limits,<sup>4</sup> a factor which could trigger

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\* See *CJPST* Vol. VII: Number 1-2 (1983) p. 235.

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the kind of massive re-thinking and broadly based social support needed to create new and vibrant forms of social organization, perhaps some form of "market-socialism".<sup>5</sup> If indeed such a scenario is not entirely implausible, it is worth noting that recent Western Marxists have been all but silent on the question of the ecology crisis and its potential for radicalization.<sup>6</sup> This omission is quite puzzling unless one considers that a serious analysis of this crisis in the "productive forces" would contradict "humanistic Marxism" with its emphasis on "production relations". Others, in the meantime, like Barry Commoner — not constrained by ideological blinders — have pioneered the way with scrupulous analyses of the crisis and of the need for fundamental changes in existing capitalist and socialist societies. In light of such considerations it is not self-evident that Western Marxist theoreticians — old or new — will prove to be useful guides in understanding present or future crises.

Jacoby rejects the claim that "old-fashioned" Marxism is a relatively coherent social theory. "What coherence?", he asks, and why then did Western Marxism emerge, he wonders — as though the mere emergence of critics is inherent proof of the invalidity of a doctrine. Since Jacoby dismisses — without critical discussion — the empirical works in history and anthropology to which I referred, he might find more convincing Gerald Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History*<sup>7</sup> which provides a rigorous demonstration of the plausibility of the classical approach.

According to Jacoby, the central issue on which we disagree springs from fundamentally different "underlying historical judgements". From his perspective the history of Marxism is not "pretty", whereas, in my view — he alleges — "the junkyard of orthodoxy is a lovely park". Since I happen to share the view that the history of Marxism is not at all "pretty", and since nothing in my review suggests the contrary I am not only astonished but also at a loss to understand the basis of these remarks.

Furthermore, Jacoby presents me as a representative of an orthodox Marxism as outdated as Engels' *Anti-Duhring*. Again one wonders on what basis such a conclusion was reached. Did I not explicitly state my position as one akin to Harris' "cultural materialism"? Had he bothered to check my reference, he would have found, incidentally, that cultural materialism is especially unsympathetic to *Anti-Duhring*. Cultural materialism, as propounded by Harris, has some fairly obvious limitations, and yet I find it — at present — a useful theory to work with and to try to develop. I have no desire, like some Western Marxists, to construct "imaginary Marxisms" — to borrow a phrase of Raymond Aron's<sup>8</sup> — out of some mysterious need to cling to Marx's name all the while rejecting the substance of what he attempted to do. One ought to give Marx his due, but advance beyond his work altogether.

Jacoby's final flourish, the accusation that I am "waiting for Godot" is an odd one. Given the events of this century, it might be levelled at all socialists including each and every Western Marxist as well! The real issue here, it would seem, rests on whether or not our futurological projections are based on adequate data and concepts. The approach I've sketched above — one which is not

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naively optimistic<sup>9</sup> — perhaps merits serious consideration. Ironically enough, Jacoby's approach in "class Unconsciousness" provides only pious hopes, summed up when he writes, "In the recesses of the blackest pessimism pulsates a secret optimism".<sup>10</sup> Perhaps in future, Jacoby will spell this out with great profundity, but as it stands it is neither convincing nor enlightening.

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### Notes

1. Lewis Coser, "Marxist Thought in the First Quarter of the Twentieth Century", *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 1, July 1972.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 184.
3. See for example, Clive Jenkins *The Collapse of Work* (London: Methuen 1981). An older study of the effects of automation on employment along with some still provocative recommendations, can be found in Robert Theobald (ed) *The Guaranteed Income* (New York: Doubleday 1967).
4. Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle* (New York: Knopf 1971) and *The Poverty of Power* (New York: Knopf 1976). Substantial portions of the latter work were serialized in *The New Yorker*, which suggests the widespread appeal of Commoner's arguments beyond that of the traditional working class. See also Jeremy Rifkin, *Entropy* (New York: Viking Press, 1980.) Recently, Soviet dissident, Rudolf Bahro, in *Socialism and Survival* (London: Heretic Books, 1982) has presented an argument with which I am, in spite of differences of detail, in broad agreement.
5. It should go without saying that many other factors would be at work in bringing about such a transformation. The point here is simply that the ecology crisis could conceivably be the most critical factor, whereas discussions of "legitimacy crisis" have not given it serious consideration. The economic issue normally raised, that of "the fiscal crisis", is arguably only a side issue, related to the current world recession: see Hugh Mosley "Is there a fiscal crisis of the state?," *Monthly Review* Vol. 30, Number 1, May 1978.
6. This view of an ecology crisis leading to radicalization across social classes, does not necessarily imply, it seems to me, a mechanistic view of human action. The reasoning here is analogous to that of Wittfogel's in *Oriental Despotism* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1957) pp. 15-16.  
With regard to the silence of neo-Marxism on the issue of ecology and "limits to growth", see Tom Boltmore "Sociology" p. 139-140 in David McLellan (ed) *Marx: the First Hundred Years* (London: Fontana 1983)
7. Gerald A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
8. Raymond Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires*, (Paris: Éditions Gallimard 1970).
9. Richard Rubinstein, *The Age of Triage* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983).
10. Jacoby, *The Dialectic of Defeat*, page 126.