

Re-examining Marxism

Alec Wintram, 7 June 2011

Marx stated that

Material force can only be overthrown by material force, but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses". (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [1843].)

Two years later, he codified the spirit behind such observations in the famous phrase:

The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to *change* it. (*Theses on Feuerbach* [1845], Thesis 11)

Marx intended the ideas of the infant movement of scientific socialism to become a material force that would change the course of history.

That these ideas did is beyond dispute. That they do not now is barely disputable. That they can again is a matter of debate (and struggle). That they should, let alone will, is the political problem of our age. Fukuyama's thesis—that history has ended in the perpetual rule of capitalism—remains to be disproven. Socialism is back at square one, or square minus *n*.

Somewhere between the defeat of the British miners' strike in 1985, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in late 1989, the hold of Marxism (and of the socialist ideal, however vaguely conceived) over the minds of the masses died. The final blow was the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990-92. Thatcher and Reagan won, actually and ideologically.

It took half a century for Marxism to become a truly threatening challenge to capitalism, roughly spanning the time from the Paris Commune of 1871 to the October Revolution of 1917 in Russia, and the ensuing foundation of the Communist (Third) International.

Since then the accumulated political and ideological capital of Marxism has been dissipated, primarily by the experience of Stalinism in the Soviet Union and China. (The social-democratic reformists aided the process from the day they opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power.)

Joseph Seymour, a theoretician of the Trotskyist Spartacist tendency, captures this reality in a characteristically [precise article](#), "Critical Notes on the 'Death of Communism' and the Ideological Conditions of the Post-Soviet World"¹. His honesty is uncharacteristic of the remnants of the Marxist left. In this article he also tries to lay out the main features of a communist society, in capsule form. But he does not address what is required to rebuild a mass socialist consciousness.

During the catastrophe of the credit crunch the cash machines of modern banking came close to shutdown, in the autumn of 2008. Since then the banking system has been propped up by truly massive subventions from the working people's daily resources. The consequences, in terms of reduced living standards and unemployment, or unspeakably increased deprivation in the under-developed regions of the world, are remarkable in two respects. They are objectively savage and

¹ *Workers Vanguard* No 949, 1 January 2010.
<http://www.icl-fi.org/english/wv/949/postsoviet.html>

grossly unequal (and we ain't seen nothing yet). Yet the subjective reaction of resistance has been quite minimal by historical standards: indeed exceedingly quiet given the provocation and maltreatment.

Support for radical change rests on two mutually-reinforcing pillars: the organizational strength of what Margaret Thatcher called the "enemy within" (the trade unions and working-class political parties), and a widespread belief or hope that this strength is the germ of, and can be mobilized to achieve, an alternative way of organizing society for the betterment of ordinary people.

Of these factors, hope is the greatest. To organize, to struggle, is to endure hardship and fear. To organize for radical political change, in the long run, requires a potent sense of a positive alternative. Otherwise, people retreat into a defensive war of attrition, where the powerful hold all the trump cards. Why build a revolutionary party, when the concept of socialist revolution seems potentially evil, or wrong-headed, or utopian?

Marx said, in a famous [letter \(1881\) to the Dutch socialist Domela Nieuwenhuis](#):

The doctrinaire and necessarily fantastic anticipations of the programme of action for a revolution of the future only divert us from the struggle of the present.²

This statement has been translated into a widespread (and accurate) notion that Marx opposed the construction of a "blueprint" for a future socialist society. A sophisticated and nuanced expression of this view can be found in an article by James Burnham in 1938, prior to his departure from Marxism:

How much more ridiculous would it be to lay out a detailed blueprint for the future in the case of a plan of social action, above all a drastic and revolutionary plan. If we are reasonably sure of the main outlines, we go ahead and find out what happens, adjusting ourselves flexibly to experience within the boundaries of our firm central purposes. Only in this way can we be genuinely scientific; the blueprinters are compelled to retire into their own imaginations from which their blueprints sprung, to become Utopians or sectarians, and to complain at history because it doesn't fit their pattern. Eastman praises the Utopian socialists, Owen and St. Simon and Fourier, over Marx because they had blueprints. Revealing praise! Does he wish us to return to the Utopians? Here, as before, Eastman does not "move forward" toward contemporary science, but swings back to pre-Marxian fantasies. It was exactly Marx's scientific scrupulousness which led him to reject sternly, whenever the question was raised, the illusion of Utopia by Blueprint.³

In the light of the experience of Stalinism, this orthodoxy deserves to be challenged.

First and fundamentally, because there is now experience of the practical problems: a quasi-experiment has been performed by Stalinism. Second, because a practical vision of a future socialist society is needed to convince a new generation of the *viability* of the Marxist project. (A vision centred on the optimum case of a confraternity of advanced industrial societies free of mortal and imminent or actual threat from capitalist counter-revolution or war is the least that is needed.)

² http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/letters/marx/81_02_22.htm

³ *New International*, Vol 4 No 6, June 1938, pp 177-180.
<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/burnham/1938/06/eastman.htm>

The purpose of politics is to attain state power for the pursuit of a positive programme for the organization of society, both in an economic and cultural sense. In this regard it is worth recalling Isaac Deutscher's statement from 1966:

We do not maintain that socialism is going to solve all predicaments of the human race. We are struggling in the first instance with the predicaments that are of man's making and that man can resolve. May I remind you that Trotsky, for instance, speaks of three basic tragedies—hunger, sex and death—besetting man. Hunger is the enemy that Marxism and the modern labour movement have taken on. In doing so they have naturally been inclined to ignore or belittle man's other predicaments. But is it not true that hunger or, more broadly, social inequality and oppression, have hugely complicated and intensified for innumerable human beings the torments of sex and death as well?... Yes, socialist man will still be pursued by sex and death; but we are convinced that he will be better equipped than we are to cope even with these.”⁴

To achieve the purpose of Marxist politics, it is necessary to rebuild the subjective factor of hope. To have well-founded hope, it is necessary to have a reasoned alternative that commands intellectual respect (and from its opponents, concomitant hostility and doubt).

This implies a multi-pronged, multi-disciplinary effort, perhaps extending over a decade or two, to rebuild a confident and persistent, theoretically strong perspective for internationalist socialism. Marx's time in the library of the British Museum after the defeat of the 1848 revolutions was not a diversion or an evasion, but a prerequisite of the organizational achievements of the Second International and of the revolution in Russia.

A proper accounting, in detail, of the failings, successes and lessons of the communo-Stalinist experiment is a central task. A comprehensive account of blood-drenched and unstable modern imperialist capitalism and its contradictions is another. A projection of the political and economic characteristics of a socialist society transitional to the withering away of the state in conditions of generalized material super-abundance is a third. A fourth topic to be examined is the way in which the struggle against hunger relates to the preservation of the planet's natural resources and to the ending of discrimination and the special or super-inequality suffered by women, racial/religious/national minorities and those of minority sexual orientations. It is also necessary to unmask and detail the fraudulent pretences of “liberal democracy” and “liberal humanitarianism” in the context of an increasingly repressive domestic and international police and military apparatus, the long colonial wars in the Middle East, and the accompanying rise in militarism and great-power patriotism.

Such a project requires the work of many over a long period. It cannot succeed without a very open and critical spirit. We lost the last time around, and we cannot assume that it was just for want of trying or leadership, or because of disunity, or simply because we faced superior might and wealth.

It is possible that “there is no alternative,” but when we look at the hell on earth that accompanies the staggering industrial, technological and cultural achievements of modern human economy and society, and think about the looming prospect of a third world war, would it not be best to try again to disprove that contention, in theory and in practice? To me that feels like a moral obligation.

⁴ *On Socialist Man*, Merit Publishers, New York, 1967