

The Crisis and Fate of Marxism in the Contemporary Era

By Douglas Kellner

Crises of Marxism have erupted regularly throughout the century. The concept of "crisis" within Marxian theory has its origins in theories of the "crisis of capitalism," which were linked to notions of the collapse of capitalism and triumph of socialism. The term "crisis" was applied to Marxism itself by Sorel, Korsch, and many contemporary theorists and in recent years there have been many claims that with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the era of Marxism is over and the theory is now obsolete. Consequently, it is claimed that the crisis of Marxism has terminated in its collapse and that Marxism is no longer a viable theory or politics for the present age.

However, just as capitalism has survived many crises, so has Marxism. Moreover, just as various crises of capitalism have elicited new survival strategies which in certain ways have strengthened the capitalist system (i.e. imperialism, organized capitalism, state capitalism, the welfare state, transnational capitalism, technocapitalism, and so on), so too crises of Marxism have periodically led to the development and improvement of the Marxian theory. Indeed, Marx's historical materialism is intrinsically a historical theory and its categories demand revision and development as new historical conditions and situations emerge. Revision is the very life of the Marxian dialectic and the theory itself demands development, revision, and even abandonment of obsolete or inadequate features as conditions emerge which put tenets of the original theory in question.

But the question nonetheless arises as to whether the collapse of the Soviet empire and of communism in the Soviet Union signifies the end of Marxism as a world-historical political force and shaper of political reality. Are these series of dramatic events the finishing blow, the crisis from which it cannot recover, the historical episode that refutes and ends it once and for all? Since Marxism is intrinsically a unity of theory and practice, if Marxian practice fails, does this discredit the theory? If Marxian politics fail catastrophically, is the Marxian theory itself totally discredited and rendered obsolete? For classical Marxism is a theory of history, of the development and direction of historical movement, and the theory is thus validated or refuted by history. Thus, if history totally goes against Marxism and it proves not to work in practice, then, arguably, Marxism would be finished and its era would be over. Thus, since Marxism advocates a unity of theory and practice, if the unity is severed and the practice fails, then the theory is put into radical question.

Marxism has, of course, been regularly denounced and declared over, especially by one-time adherents. During the Cold War era, a whole generation of former Marxists denounced the "god that failed." In The Postmodern Condition (1979), former Marxian radical Jean-Francois Lyotard argued that the era of totalizing theories of history and grand narratives of emancipation are over. Earlier, former Marxist theorist Jean Baudrillard declared in The Mirror of Production (1974) that Marxism merely mirrored capitalist development and was inadequate as a radical theory of emancipation; in his next book (still untranslated), L'echange symbolique et la mort, Baudrillard declared the end of political economy and the end Marxism in the postmodern emergence of a

society of simulations and hyperreality. Indeed, the success of postmodern theory is parasitical on their claims concerning the obsolescence of Marxism which positions the postmodernists as the most advanced radical social theorists.

In recent years, many books and articles have argued that the collapse of Soviet communism definitely signifies the end of Marxism. Francis Fukuyama's celebrated book The End of History (1991) in fact is arguing for the end of Marxism. Many former Marxists have been diligently rethinking Marxism and some are ready to abandon it and come up with something new. After several decades of New Left activism and Marxist scholarship Ronald Aronson calls for the abandonment of Marxism in his forthcoming book On our Own. For Aronson,

And, of course, there have been a wealth of articles in the mainstream press and opinion journals, too numerous to mention, that have declared the collapse of Marxism. Against these positions, my argument in this article will be that the collapse of Soviet Communism does not constitute a refutation of Marxism, or signify its obsolescence. I will argue, first, that there are discontinuities between Marx/Lenin/Stalin/ and later Soviet leadership, so one cannot blame the collapse of communism on Marx himself or the doctrine associated with his name. Secondly, I argue that Rousseau, Hegel, and the Right Hegelians and not Marx are the father of Soviet Totalitarianism and the modern totalitarian state tout court. Further, I'll argue that Marx's concept of socialism is dramatically at odds with Soviet communism, Leninism, Stalinism, or whatever one wants to call the system of bureaucratic collectivism that collapsed in the Soviet Union and its satellites. Next, I suggest that overthrow of Stalinism was exemplified, or justified, by Marx's principles and that Marxist theory provides an illuminating analysis and critique of Soviet communism and its empire, providing important theoretical resources to make sense of contemporary history reality. Finally, I will argue that Marxism continues to possess resources to theorize and criticize the present age and that Marxian politics remains at least a part of a progressive or radical politics in the current era.

In short, my main argument will be that Marxian theory continues to be useful today even if there are problems with certain aspects of its theory of history and political analysis and strategies which seem to be put in question by contemporary developments. Yet I shall also argue that we need new thinking in our radical theory and politics and that this is completely consistent with the critical and historical impulses of the Marxian theory itself.

I. Discontinuities Within the Marxian Tradition

For decades, Marxism has been blamed for the historical catastrophes of the era. In The Open Society and its Enemies, philosopher of science Karl Popper argued that the totalitarian state has its origins in the political philosophies of Hegel and Marx. This refrain was repeated in the 1970s by former Maoist Andre Glucksman, one of the darlings of the new philosophers, who claimed that "master thinkers," such as Marx, were responsible for the evils of communism and other totalitarian societies. And, of course, throughout the CW anti-communists have tried to pin all of the problems of the era on the philosophy of Karl Marx and his followers.

Such polemics are, of course, hopelessly idealist and greatly exaggerate the roles of ideas in history. Blaming evils of the modern world, and especially the trajectory of Soviet communism, on Marx covers over the significant differences between Marx, Lenin, Stalin, and the later Soviet leadership. Marxism has always had a divided legacy, between those following socialist and communist parties, institutionalized in the divisions between the Second International and the Third International. Both the democratic-reformist and insurrectionist-revolutionary strategies for constructing socialism could appeal to Marx's text and practice for legitimation of their own theory and politics, but as it turned out the social democrats of the Second International, beginning already with Bernstein in the 1890s, distanced themselves from Marxism, while the Leninists of the Third International proclaimed themselves loyal Marxists and the authentic heirs of classical Marxism.

Such a historically-accidental bonding between Marxism and LL should not, however, obscure the profound differences between Marx and Lenin. Lenin advocated the formation of a conspiratorial party of professional revolutionaries and privileged violent insurrection and class war as the instruments of revolution. Marx, by contrast, was committed to people's democracy and the tenet that the liberation of the working class could only be the work of the working class itself. Marx and Engels published the "Communist Manifesto" to openly proclaim the ideas and goals of the communist movement and both pointed to the Paris Commune, marked by popular society of the people, as the model of what they meant by socialism. For Lenin, by contrast the central committee of the communist party was the self-proclaimed vanguard of the revolution and power and society was in effect concentrated in the party's hands.

Likewise, on many occasions, Marx proclaimed a democratic road to socialism. His early commentary on Hegel's Philosophy of Right championed democracy as the highest form of GO and contained a powerful critique of the absolutist state and bureaucratic GO. During the 1848 revolution, Marx supported a democratic road to socialism and alliance with progressive elements of the bourgeoisie in a two-stage road to socialism. In his address to the First International Workingmen's Association, he proclaimed the winning of legislation to shorten the working day and the workers co-op movement as the two great victories for the political economy of the working class. In his Hague address of 1872 to the International, Marx also proclaimed that a democratic road to socialism was viable in many countries.

Of course, Marx always had a contextual political theory and in certain contexts supported revolutionary class war and insurrection, so one can find support for various theories of the construction of socialism in Marx's own writings. Yet, in his key texts, Marx was a consistent democrat, supporting workers self-activity as the locus of popular society. Marx never advocated a party state, never defended a communist bureaucracy, and would no doubt have been appalled by the deformation of his ideas in the Soviet Union, so to bin the failures of Soviet communism on Marx seems totally unfair.

Indeed, there are important differences between Lenin and Stalin as well, with Stalin eliminating the democratic centralism with the party for one-man rule, that exterminated all

political enemies and opposition. While Lenin championed a vanguard party to make the revolution and then to run the revolution, Lenin allowed factions, practiced democracy within the party, was sometimes outvoted, and practiced what he and the Bolsheviks called "democratic centralism." An earlier Leninist text, State and Revolution, was even quite populist, following Marx's text on the Paris Commune as the model of socialism. To be sure, Lenin established a revolutionary bureaucracy that could be manipulated by a Stalin, but Stalinism had nothing to do with any sort of democratic socialism, centralist or not. Such a regime was a throw-back to a feudalistic Czarism and had little to do with Marxism, or even LL. The later collective bureaucratic Soviet leadership was also at odds with Marxism which was always strongly anti-bureaucratic.

Finally, the polemic that blames the evils of Soviet communism on Marx also fails to notice that there are many traditions and political tendencies within Marxism. Rosa Luxemborg, for instance, associated socialism intimately with democracy, arguing that there could be no socialism without democracy and no democracy without socialism. She was an early critic of what she saw as the deformations of socialism in the Soviet Union. Likewise, the council communists of the post-World War I revolutionary movement consistently supported a view of socialism as a workers democracy and advocated a libertarian concept of socialism, as did Herbert Marcuse and his comrades in the Frankfurt School, Karl Korsch (for most of his life), and many other so-called Western Marxists. These theorists were often critical of the deformation of socialism in the Soviet Union and usually supported a democratic version of socialism. Thus to equate Marxism with the bureaucratic collectivism in the Soviet Union is simply historically false and highly dishonest.

I I. Fathers of the Modern Totalitarian State

In this section, I wish to suggest that it is Rousseau and the right Hegelians who are the fathers of the modern totalitarian state and not Karl Marx. While many readings of Rousseau are possible, including those who claim him for radical democratic theory, there are passages in his writings that clearly qualify him for the title of father of the modern totalitarian state. There are passages in Rousseau that are absolutely shocking and that legitimize the most oppressive practices of totalitarian state, providing a legitimation in advance of the worst excesses of Soviet communism. In The Social Contract, for instance, there are a large number of provocative statements, such that individuals "must be forced to be free," or that project the paradox that the overcoming of alienation requires total submission to the community, whereby individuals gain their liberty.

Rousseau also champions the indivisibility of sovereign power, against Montesquieu's doctrine of the division of powers. Although Rousseau's anchoring of the indivisibility of sovereign power in the people sounds good, it is highly dangerous, especially when he defends and legitimates censorship. There is indeed no concept of the freedom of press and is nothing on a bill of rights in Rousseau's theory. Indeed, there are really no individual rights and liberties at all in Rousseau's collectivist conception.

Marx, by contrast, was a newspaper editor who wrote the most brilliant defenses of the

freedom of the press that we possess. It is thus a historical anomaly and perversion of Marx's philosophy that Soviet Communism did not allow the freedom of the press. But there is nothing in Marx to legitimate censorship, while Rousseau provides arguments for a censor! Worst of all, is Rousseau's defense of the imposition of civil religion on the people, as when he writes:

While not having the ability to obligate anyone who does not believe, the sovereign can banish from the state anyone who does not believe them. It can banish him not for being impious but for being unsociable, for being incapable of sincerely loving the laws and justice, and of sacrificing his life, if necessary, for his duty. If, after having publicly acknowledged these same dogmas, a person acts as if he does not believe them, he should be put to death; he has committed the greatest of crimes: he has lied before the laws. (p. 102)

There is, of course, nothing like this in Marx, so it is really Rousseau's views that go much further in legitimating later forms of societal repression than Marx's more genuinely democratic theory. Furthermore, Rousseau's attack on luxury and celebration of simplicity and frugality provide a good legitimation for communist repressive egalitarianism and remind one of the "crude communism" that Marx himself attacked.

Thus it is Rousseau and not Marx who provides a legitimatization for totalitarian societies. Furthermore, it is Hegel and the Right Hegelians who follow Rousseau in providing legitimation for modern totalitarian states. Marx and the Left Hegelians, by contrast, called for democracy and attacked the authoritarian states of their day which Hegel and his followers defended. The Hegelianian Right claimed that democracy would produce chaos and that only a strong state, sanctioned by religion, could preserve order and stability. Thus, from the perspective of political theory, it is also dishonest and misleading to blame Marx for the horrors of Soviet communism, and other authoritarian communist regimes, when it is other thinkers whose ideas are more closely connected with modern totalitarian theory and practice.

III Toward a Critique of Soviet Communism

Far from being implicated in legitimating Soviet communism, I believe that the Marxian theory and tradition provides some of the most powerful critiques of the deformation of socialism in the Soviet Union. Moreover, I believe that the Marxian theory provides the resources for analysis of the collapse of Soviet communism and for providing an account of why bureaucratic communism doesn't work.

a) corruption // privileges: new class

nepotism on grand scale

insensitivity, meglomania: power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely; don't know if former is true; latter certainly is

was supposed to be a classless society; but became a new class society

b) inefficiency // rigid, automatic

deals cut: managers/workers

Live and let live;

resistance to work // inefficiency

growing bitterness and alienation

growing unrest and struggle

allocation system unwieldy, cumbersome; lack of incentives

was supposed to overcome alienated labor, but provided new forms of alienation of workers

c) alienates workers: leading to mass resistance/repression/ more struggle and collapse of communism

refutation of communist ideology; workers state;

failed to incorporate gains of bourgeois revolutionary heritage-- as Marx and classical Marxists urge--Bronner

need for genuine democracy to have genuine sociology: Rosa

popular sovereignty/ division of power (Montesquieu)

d) Soviet communism: Totalitarian; state controlled everything; society grew stagnant; no public sphere, no civil society, no economic freedom, so stagnation set in

need for division of power

Gorbachev: response to failures of Soviet system and struggles for change

against Great Man theory (Time and media); many people realized problems with system; criticized it; struggled for change

Gorby is heavy; also lacked vision (Boggs)

glasnost: cultural freedom and openness; criticism, experimentation in arts, intellectual freedoms were needed for system to survive, regenerate itself

perestroika: economic, political, and social restructuring

Cleaver: merely economic technique to integrate workers

I disagreed: democratic potential; expansion of democracy

Never had chance for genuine test; collapse of Gorby and return to market means that Soviet communism never had a chance to reform; probably too corrupted...

Yet it must be admitted that after communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern bloc, communism and Marxism are disputed, are in disrepute.

Yet not totally: elections in Roumania and _____ where old commies were elected; big demo in Moscow and elsewhere in former Soviet Union on anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution

if Yeltsin and capitalism discredit themselves, who knows what people will then look for....

There are other lessons for the Marxian theory from the collapse of Soviet communism. It seems that only democratic socialism can work

consistent with Marxism: Marx, Luxemburg, Korsch, Marcuse, Habermas
need for genuine democracy

2) making sense of these events proves need for Marxist global theory // mass politics

intersection: micro/macro theory and politics

requires global theory to make sense out of it;

1989 most significant year since 1848

3) struggles circulate: 1848: world revolution (Marx's conception since German Ideology)

television played key role

4) continuity of heritage of revolts of 1989--collapse of Communist empire and struggles against Soviet Union itself;

1789; 1848; 1870; 1905; 1917; fit in with heritage of revolutionary struggle;

against postmodern theory and some modern theory: combined micro and macrostruggles

why were revolts against Soviet-style communism? it had failed to incorporate the progressive heritage of Marxism and revolutionary heritage into its system; alienation; corruption

Conclusion

In conclusion, I wish to argue that the latest "crisis of Marxism" is not so much a sign of the obsolescence of the Marxian theory as a typical situation for a social theory that faces anomalies or events which challenge its theories. The term "crisis" in Marxian discourse suggests cataclysmic collapse and, as Habermas suggests, a terminal illness that could bring death to its patient. I have argued in this paper that the most recent crisis of Marxism has not been terminal and that Marxism still has the resources to provide an account of contemporary history. As theory, therefore, Marxism is alive and well, though Marxist politics seem to be floundering. It is a curiosity of the fate Marxism today that in the past decades, there has been a tremendous development of theory, while there has been a steady decline in Marxist politics, as well as a declining role for Marxist discourse and practice in contemporary political movements.

While this is very bad for the classical Marxian synthesis, which presented itself as a unity of theory and practice, one could stress the positive side, the power of Marxian theory, its continuing productivity and use-value. In general, crises for the Marxist theory are an opportunity for development of the theory. Crises bring about a challenge to a social system or theory that may lead to its weakening and collapse or to its improvement and strengthening. Crises of Marxism are like the periodic events that global socio-historical theories continually undergo when events belie forecasts, or historical changes appear that force development or revision of the theory. When theories like Marxism are put in question during a "crisis," debate ensue which frequently improve the theory. Consequently, crises of Marxism do not necessarily refer to failures of Marxism that pretend its collapse and irrelevance but rather point toward opportunities to grow, develop, and strengthen themselves.

The particular challenge and opportunity today for the Marxian theory is to provide an account of the restructuring of capitalism and new system of technocapitalism that is now emerging. I would argue that the Marxian theory provides the best perspectives and resources for this monumental past and that the Marxian theory continues to provide the most powerful resources to develop a social theory and radical politics for the present age.

no time to rehearse these arguments today, but I would argue that we are undergoing a world crisis of capitalism; world restructuring; not just disorganized capitalist, but reorganized; need political economy, global theory;

relevance of Marxist political theory, theory of socialism, for politics today, its contributions and limitations, revolves around its resolute focus on class. During the past twelve years in the United States and more or less elsewhere throughout the world, there have been growing class

divisions

It may also be premature to sound the death-knell of Marxist politics.

collapse of CA failure of market CA experiments in Eastern Europe and the former SU.

Yet, finally, and in conclusion, I would argue for the need for new thinking and politics. I have argued that events in the Communist World of the last couple of years refute both cold war anti-communist myths and communist dogma and require new political thinking;

this is true of much conservative, liberal, and leftist thinking all of which failed to anticipate the dramatic upheaval in the communist world.

In view of these changes, we need dramatically new political thinking, we need to dispense with a lot of old thinking, and come to terms with the new and still changing political realities of our time.

post-Cold war political theory and practice

Yet we need to build on viable political and theoretical perspectives and resources of the past, and I would argue that Marxism continues to provide resources for critical theory and radical politics today

But I believe that we need new syntheses, new articulations, new theories drawing on best of Marxian theory, postmodern theory, feminism, whatever