

The collapse of Stalinism and the future of Marxism

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the changing fortunes of the marxist tradition within the social sciences since 1968 involve much more than simply the internal progress or degeneration of this tradition conceptualized as a distinctive research programme; they are closely related to changes in the external social, economic and political environment. Hence any assessment of the problems and prospects of the marxist tradition within the social sciences must refer not simply to the internal intellectual histories of the major social scientific disciplines, but also to the wider historical context within which these disciplines are situated.

We [marxists] have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of *bourgeois* democracy; we have always revealed the hard kernel of social inequality and the lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom - not in order to reject the latter but to spur the working class into not being satisfied with the shell, but rather, by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy ...

(Rosa Luxemburg, 1918: 393).

Do not trust the bourgeoisie; control the leaders; rely only on your own force.

May 5, 1917 (Leon Trotsky, 1980: 364).

[Classical] marxist theory was not produced *outside* the working class movement. It was produced *inside* the working class movement. True it was produced by intellectuals [but] ... they were precisely those who linked their fate with that of the working class, formed organisations to institutionalise that union, and participated in the class struggle for socialism

(Norman Geras, 1986: 127).

Introduction

During the 1980s the popularity of the marxist tradition of thought declined within the social sciences. The external environment was unremittingly hostile as the Western labour movements suffered a succession of industrial and political defeats, the activist base of the social movements declined while their intelligentsia became increasingly incorporated within the policy-making machinery of the state, and both conservative and social democratic governments adopted the policy agenda of the New Right. Within the social sciences there was a growing reaction against the

renaissance of the marxist tradition which had taken place in the decade following the May 1968 revolutionary upheaval in France. An increasing number of intellectuals who had identified themselves as marxists during this decade, subsequently criticized, rejected and condemned the marxist tradition as fatally flawed during the 1980s. The collapse of East European Stalinism in 1989, which so many intellectuals on both the right and the left considered 'really existing socialism', appeared to confirm the view that the marxist tradition was in terminal decline.

It is easy to view the alleged 'crisis of marxism' within the social sciences as a purely intellectual matter. In this vein marxism can be seen as collapsing under the weight of its own logical contradictions and in the face of societal and historical developments which it is unable to explain. However, as anyone who has seriously studied the history of economic thought will be aware, the internal intellectual development of all of the social scientific disciplines is inextricably linked to the wider historical context within which these disciplines are situated. For example, the crisis of pre-Keynesian marginalism (or neoclassicism) and the Keynesian revolution in macroeconomics, and more recently, the crisis of Keynesianism and resurgence of neoclassicism, are intellectual developments which clearly have been profoundly influenced by the actual historical course of capitalist development during the twentieth century.

Analogously, this paper argues that the changing fortunes of the marxist tradition within the social sciences since 1968 involve much more than simply the internal progress or degeneration of this tradition conceptualized as a distinctive research programme; they are closely related to changes in the external social, economic and political environment. Hence any assessment of the problems and prospects of the marxist tradition within the social sciences must refer not simply to the internal intellectual histories of the major social scientific disciplines, but also to the wider historical context within which these disciplines are situated.

In this respect one particular set of historical events clearly has had a tremendous impact on the popularity of marxism within the social sciences: the collapse of the brutally repressive dictatorships in Eastern Europe. All of the purely intellectual difficulties with marxist perspectives in the social sciences pale into insignificance given what is popularly seen as being the historical failure of marxism when applied in practice. Millions in the West have accepted the dominant ideological presentation of the Stalinist dictatorships as 'really existing socialism'. If marxism is to have any kind of future within the social sciences then that will depend on it being able to rise like phoenix from the ashes of Stalinism. In order to determine whether or not the marxist tradition is capable of doing that, this essay focuses on: i) the generalized political shift to the right in the advanced capitalist societies from the late 1970s to 1990 and the associated intellectual retreat from marxism within the social sciences; ii) the impact of Stalinism on marxist intellectuals in the West; and iii) the isolation of most university-based marxist intellectuals from the working class and concrete political practice.¹

A consideration of the future prospects of marxism following the collapse of Stalinism presupposes the existence of some agreement on the constitution of marxism itself. Of course no such agreement exists. The very definition of the tradition is a matter of contention and dispute.² The term 'marxism' is used in a very broad sense to refer both to the classical marxism of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others and to those contemporary 'neo-marxist' schools of thought which accept the validity of at least some of the core theoretical and methodological principles of classical marxism. This paper adopts and uses the usual terminology with only one notable innovation: the term 'new classical marxism' is used to designate those contemporary marxists who, despite having many disagreements over specific issues, are still working within the classical marxist tradition, albeit on the basis of the selective and critical appropriation of particular aspects of classical marxism. Specifically new classical marxists still accept the basic principles of classical marxism which include:

- i. (some version of) the marxian materialist conception of history;
- ii. the marxian theory of surplus value;
- iii. the primacy, desirability and feasibility of working class self-emancipation;

- iv. (generally realist interpretations of) marxian methodology;
- v. the classical critique of reformist social democracy by Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky and others;
- vi. a commitment to the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society and the establishment of socialism which centrally involves workers democratically controlling their workplaces, the allocation of economic resources, and the institutions of society and the state;
- vii. the necessity for a revolutionary socialist party (although views vary widely on the political programme, organizational structure, strategy and tactics of such a party).

This is by no means an exhaustive list. Nor is there universal agreement by what I have referred to as 'new classical marxists' on any of these points. However, the identification of these principles does enable us to distinguish those contemporary marxists who retain a strong commitment to the classical tradition from those who do not. Prominent new classical marxists include Alex Callinicos, Robert Brenner, Ernest Mandel, Norman Geras, David McNally, Chris Harman, John Molyneux, Ellen Meiksins Wood, Hal Draper, Michael Lowy and Ralph Miliband. These intellectuals are associated with a number of different socialist tendencies and organisations but they all share, at least intellectually, a meaningful commitment to classical marxism. In contrast, the various neo-marxisms which emerged from the late 1960s onwards are characterized by varying degrees of distance from classical marxism. This essay is concerned primarily, but not exclusively, with assessing the future prospects of 'new classical' as opposed to 'neo' marxism.

The intellectual retreat from marxism during the 1980s

On the 13th of November 1977 Althusser, who was certainly then one of the world's most influential marxist intellectuals, declared that marxism had entered a crisis. The experience of Stalinism had placed in question 'the very idea of socialism, not as a generic aspiration, but as a *theory of society, a different mode of organization*' (Althusser quoted in Callinicos, 1982: 5-6). These pronouncements marked the beginning of a generalized intellectual retreat from marxism as a growing number of marxist intellectuals critically examined and progressively abandoned the key theoretical and methodological components of classical marxism.

The emergence of a growing intellectual crisis of marxism in the period from 1977 to 1990 was clearly related to the wider historical context. Following the tumultuous year of 1968 there was a dramatic international upsurge in working class struggle, student political activism, and the rise of new social movements. As Harman accurately observes, in 1968 'the world may not have been turned upside down as it was in 1648, 1789 or 1917. But it was powerfully shaken. And the shock waves broke the fetters on the minds of many people, leading them to believe that society could be completely changed, that everything was possible' (1988: vii-viii). The intellectual renaissance of marxism was driven by the political radicalization of the students and staff of the universities in the advanced capitalist societies during this period.

From the late 1970s onwards, to use a delightfully old fashioned marxist phrase, the balance of class forces shifted very significantly (Callinicos, 1989: 164-171; Harman, 1988: ch.16; Roper, 1990). There was a generalized decline in strike activity, rank-and-file militancy, and a corresponding rise of employer militancy. A dramatic upsurge in business political activism placed increasing pressure on governments to abandon the social democratic Keynesian policy framework of the post-war era. Margaret Thatcher was elected Prime Minister in Britain in 1979 and Ronald Reagan was elected to the US presidency a year later. The long boom of the post-war era collapsed in the mid 1970s and the rapidly rising unemployment which resulted undermined the bargaining power of trade unions. Those strike actions which did take place became increasingly defensive in nature. The activist base of the social movements slowly but steadily declined during the 1980s. In sum, internationally after 1977 there was simultaneously an ongoing economic crisis, a shift in the balance of power between

capital and labour, the growth of business political activism, decline in the activist base of the social movements, and widespread adoption and implementation of the policy agenda of the New Right by both social democratic and conservative governments.

It is vitally important to recognize that these developments provided the impetus for the critical rejection of key elements of classical marxism. For example, it is much easier to argue that the working class is in decline and is no longer capable of acting as a force for progressive change if the union movements of the advanced capitalist societies are actually in the midst of a period of retreat. This view was also reinforced by the continued vitality of the women's movements of the advanced capitalist countries during the late 1970s and early 1980s.

A sophisticated account of the intellectual history of the crisis of marxism would explore the interaction of internal intellectual disputes and the changing external historical context in much greater depth than is possible here. Suffice to say that by the end of the 1980s marxism had been subject to a barrage of criticism by intellectuals moving right-wards in conjunction with the general shift to right in the political cultures of the advanced capitalist societies. These criticisms include:

- i. the neo-Ricardian critique of the marxian labour theory of value;
- ii. the critique of 'fundamentalist' marxian crisis theory;
- iii. the associated rejection of the marxian theory of exploitation, more 'orthodox' theories of class structuration, and marxian methodology by analytical marxists;
- iv. the critique of the classical marxist conceptualization of the potentially transformative role of the working class by 'new revisionists';
- v. the associated feminist critique of marxism;
- vi. the environmentalist critique of marxism;
- vii. the neo-Weberian critique of marxist state theory;
- viii. the rejection of marxism on the grounds that socialist revolution will inevitably degenerate into dictatorship.

Under the influence of this intellectual onslaught against virtually every major theoretical, methodological and political principle of classical marxism, there has been a significant decline in the number of students and staff within the universities who are prepared to identify themselves with the classical marxist tradition. While the number of intellectuals who retained a commitment to classical marxism declined, those who did retain that commitment included marxist scholars of considerable talent. Consequently, there have been intellectually powerful defences of marxism in response to the critiques listed above.³ This essay proceeds on the assumption that the classical marxist tradition, while certainly problematic, is defensible and, indeed, is essential to making sense of the world we currently inhabit.

The impact of Stalinism on the western marxisms

The collapse of really 'existing socialism'?

For the majority of marxist intellectuals in the West, the East European revolutions represented the collapse of communism and the ultimate defeat of the original ideals of the Russian Revolution of October 1917. The assumption of a fundamental historical continuity between 1917 (marxism and Leninism) and the repressive dictatorships which emerged in Eastern Europe from the 1920s onwards (Stalinism) is a pervasive theme of western marxist writing on the Eastern European revolutions. Those intellectuals who have had, and retain, illusions in Stalinism consider that, as Blackburn puts it, 'the Soviet system' implemented 'key aspects of the classical marxist and socialist programme' (1991: 177). On the other hand, those intellectuals who were most consistent in their critical rejection of Stalinism prior to 1989, have viewed developments in Eastern Europe in a largely positive light. From this perspective the collapse of Stalinism represents neither a defeat nor a

victory for socialism, neither a massive historical step forward nor a step backwards but, as Harman (1990) puts it, a step sideways - a change from state to market capitalism.

Nowhere is the view that the collapse of Stalinism constitutes a disaster for socialism better exemplified than by the contributions to the book edited by New Left Review editor - Robin Blackburn: *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*. For Norberto Bobbio 'The catastrophe of historical communism stands literally before everyone's eyes - the catastrophe of communism as a world movement, born of the Russian Revolution, promising emancipation of the poor and oppressed, the "wretched of the earth"' (1991: 3). Fred Halliday considers that 'The Left has been confounded by the popular rejection of socialism, and the espousal of nationalism, predominant throughout the eastern bloc states' (1991: 78). Robin Blackburn has grave doubts about the viability of socialism as an alternative to capitalism: 'the ruin of 'marxist-Leninist' communism has been sufficiently comprehensive to eliminate it as an alternative to capitalism and to compromise the very idea of socialism' (1991 : 173). Eric Hobsbawm is also clearly profoundly pessimistic about the future prospects for socialism: 'It is much easier to see 1989 as a conclusion than as a beginning. It was the end of an era in which world history was about the October Revolution [sic.]. For over seventy years all Western governments and ruling classes were haunted by the spectre of social revolution and Communism ... (1991: 115)'.

As these statements make clear, for most western marxists 'Communism', 'State Socialism', or 'really existing socialism' constituted, in however a distorted form, the practical implementation of key aspects of the classical marxist vision of socialism. All of these statements rest on the assumption that socialism has only existed in two forms during the twentieth century: Communism in the East and social democracy in the West. This ignores the continued existence of the revolutionary socialist (or classical marxist) tradition throughout the twentieth century.

The assumed historical continuity between the ideas of Marx, Engels and Lenin, and the Stalinist dictatorships, has been challenged by many marxists in the West from the time of Trotsky and the Left Opposition's fight against the rising Stalinist bureaucracy during the 1920s (see Callinicos, 1990; Cliff, 1991). Leon Trotsky's *The Revolution Betrayed*, while it is problematic in many important respects, nonetheless represented the first attempt to provide a systematic marxist analysis of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. Those who followed or were influenced by Trotsky rejected the idea that Stalinism represented the practical implementation of marxian socialism. Trotskyism as a political and intellectual current defined itself by the rejection of Stalinism in the East and social democracy in the West - and by the reassertion of what it took to be the traditions of October 1917 - of the revolutionary transformation of society by the proletariat democratically organized through workers' councils (Callinicos, 1990: 2). It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the Trotskyist tradition has been subject to so much hostility: it has directly challenged the two dominant traditions on the Left in the advanced capitalist societies.

The Trotskyist tradition itself fragmented during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s and unfortunately many of these fragments degenerated into unhealthy quasi-religious sects. This had the effect of discrediting Trotskyism on the wider Left as well as within the union movement. But this should not prevent open-minded scholars (are there any with regard to Trotsky's contribution to marxism?) from recognizing that it was the major Trotskyist currents which generated the most sustained attempts to analyze Stalinism from a marxist perspective prior to 1989. Three major interpretations of Stalinism arose: first, the orthodox Trotskyist analysis of the Stalinist regimes as degenerated or deformed workers' states (articulated most notably by Ernest Mandel); second, the view that Stalinist regimes were neither capitalist nor socialist but constituted a form of bureaucratic collectivism (Max Shachtman, Robert Brenner, Hal Draper); and third, the view that the Stalinist regimes were bureaucratic state capitalist (Tony Cliff, Alex Callinicos, Chris Harman).

It is remarkable that so much recent marxist writing on the implications of the East European revolutions for marxism should make no reference to them. It is astonishing that a book claiming to 'explore the historical meaning of Communism's meteoric trajectory across the twentieth century'

(Blackburn, 1991: ix), should fail to contain a single chapter which seriously discusses these Marxist interpretations of Stalinism.⁴

Socialist democracy and Stalinist dictatorship

Blackburn argues that 'for Marxists to disclaim any responsibility whatever for the October Revolution and the state which issued from it would be wrong' (1991: 177). The argument that follows amounts to little more than a refinement of the Marxism = Leninism = Stalinism equation. It is revealing that he lumps together 'responsibility' (the precise meaning of which in this context is entirely unclear) of marxism for *both* the first revolution in history in which the working class overthrew a repressive dictatorship, creating vibrant new democratic institutions, and effectively ended the blood bath that was WWI, with the rise of a brutally repressive dictatorship under Stalin, the suppression of the democratic institutions or Soviets that lay at the heart of the October Revolution, the mass murder of Stalin's political opponents, the forced collectivization of agriculture, and so forth. It doesn't appear to have occurred to Blackburn that there might be marxists who are happy to admit 'responsibility' for the October Revolution while simultaneously denouncing the Stalinist counter-revolution of the 1920s.

As we have seen, Blackburn supports his argument concerning the fundamental historical continuity of marxism, Leninism and Stalinism, with the claim that the Stalinist regimes implemented 'key aspects of the classical marxist and socialist programme, implicating, in some degree, any politics which chooses public ownership as a means and popular welfare as a goal' (1991: 177). The 'key aspects' which he then mentions include: (i) state ownership and planning; (ii) state provision of health and education; and (iii) the social promotion of those of proletarian extraction (1991: 178). It is far from clear why Blackburn considers either (ii) or (iii) to be definitive of the classical marxist vision of socialism. While classical marxists argued for state provision of health and education, this hardly represents the advocacy of a society that has decisively broken with capitalism. In most of the advanced capitalist societies the state is extensively involved in the provision of health and education. In addition, the material standard of living of the working class has increased substantially during the twentieth century. So Blackburn's argument rests on the first point - Stalinism constituted a form of socialism, albeit in a highly distorted form, because the state owned the means of production and engaged in centralized economic planning. This, of course, echoes the orthodox Trotskyist degenerated workers' state analysis in which the economy is held to be socialist (state ownership and planning) while the polity is nonsocialist (absence of proletarian democracy).

Miliband in an article which generally endorses this line of argument at least is prepared to admit that:

In the unlikely event of their wish to find textual ideological inspiration for their form of rule, Communist Leaders would have sought in vain in the many volumes of Marx's and Engels's *Collected Works*. Least of all would they have found any notion of single-party monopolistic rule. They might have fared rather better with Lenin's *Collected Works*, but even this would have required a very selective reading ... (1991: 9).

The major reason that Stalinist dictators could only use the texts of the classical marxists in the most grotesquely distorted way to justify their rule was precisely that these regimes violated every basic principle of that tradition. In particular, for all the classical marxists democracy wasn't merely an optional extra for socialism: the establishment of socialism centrally involved workers taking power themselves and exercising collective and democratic control over workplaces, resource allocation through democratic planning and over the institutions of society and the state.

The basic principle of classical marxism, considered as a political movement, was written by Marx into the preamble of the first International: 'The emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves'.⁵ For all the classical marxists, including Lenin, the

struggle for socialism is a struggle from below by the mass of workers (and other oppressed groups) within society. For Marx and Engels, as well as the major figures in classical marxism who succeeded them, socialism is a movement for the self-emancipation of the working class and that process centrally involves the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in order to establish a new form of society governed by the workers themselves. It is precisely in this sense that socialism is 'a movement of the immense majority, acting in the interests of the majority'.

Classical marxism did not simply reject liberal democracy, rather it argued that the liberal or bourgeois form of democracy was too limited and restrictive. Socialist democracy would both incorporate key elements of liberal democracy - citizenship rights, freedom of political expression and assembly, regular multi-party elections - and ultimately transcend it by democratizing the whole of society, not just the political sphere. In this regard, Draper is entirely correct to insist that Marx defined socialism in democratic terms and democracy in socialist terms: 'Marx's socialism (communism) as a political programme may be most quickly defined, from the marxist standpoint, as the complete democratization of society, not merely of political forms' (1977: 282).

This classical marxist conception of socialist democracy transcending liberal democracy is neatly encapsulated in Marx's critique of parliamentary democracy. For Marx bourgeois democracy of this form constituted a 'democratic swindle'. As Draper observes Marx considered that:

The 'democratic swindle' was a swindle not insofar as it was democratic but on the contrary insofar as it utilized democratic forms to frustrate genuine democratic control from below. The phrase itself comes from a reference by Marx to the country which, he well understood, was the *most* democratic in constitutional form at this time: the United States. It was, indeed, 'the model country of the democratic swindle' not because it was less democratic than others but for precisely the opposite reason (1977, 306).

This central insight is also evident in the analyses of bourgeois or liberal democracy by Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lenin. For the major figures of classical marxism, liberal democracy was to be overthrown by revolutionary and insurrectionary means, but this centrally involved the incorporation and expansion of many of the democratic rules and procedures associated with liberal democracy. It is, therefore, surprising that so many contemporary socialist scholars argue for a rapprochement between socialism and liberalism. It is, to be frank, to display an astonishing ignorance of the intellectual history of the classical marxist tradition (see for example McLellan, 1989).

This is an absolutely vital point. If it is accepted that democracy is definitive of the classical marxist vision of socialism, if democracy is indeed at the very heart of this vision of socialism, then it follows that the Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe and Asia were not, at least in this sense, *socialist*. There are four key texts within the classical marxist tradition which lend considerable weight to this view: Marx's analysis of the Paris Commune in *The Civil War in France*; Luxemburg's critical discussion of the Bolsheviks in her pamphlet *The Russian Revolution; Lenin 's State & Revolution*; and Trotsky's analysis of Stalinism in *The Revolution Betrayed*.

Marx

In a famous passage in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels spoke in vague terms of a revolution in which 'the first step ... is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle of democracy' (1968: 52). The abolition of private property was clearly understood by Marx and Engels to centrally involve the exercise of effective control by the proletariat over the means of production: 'All production [is] concentrated in the hands of a vast association of the whole nation' in which 'the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all' (ibid: 53).

The revolutionary uprising of workers and brief establishment of the Paris Commune in 1871 had a decisive impact on Marx and Engels' ideas concerning the political form of working class self-emancipation. They considered that the commune was:

a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. Its true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economic emancipation of labour (Marx, 1968: 290).

The establishment of the Commune showed that 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes' (Marx, 1968: 285). Rather the working class had to build a thoroughly democratic 'political form' characterized by a number of principles which became central to the classical marxist vision of socialism. First, the overthrow of the bourgeois parliament and the establishment of directly representative and participatory institutions. Second, the establishment of a new workers' state composed of workplace, district, and regional assemblies with a multi-party national assembly. Third, these assemblies to be held accountable to their constituencies by: (a) the right of recall (delegates to these assemblies were 'to be at anytime revocable and bound by the ... formal instructions' of their constituents (Marx, 1968: 288)); and (b) frequent elections. This meant that 'instead of deciding once in three or six years which member of the ruling class was to misrepresent the people in Parliament, universal suffrage was to serve the people ... (ibid: 289)'. Fourth, the standing army and other 'repressive organs of the old governmental power were to be amputated' and replaced by a popular militia (ibid). Finally, the Commune sought the abolition of private property but this did not, for Marx, mean that it would be simply replaced by state ownership: it centrally involved the exercise of effective control over the means of production by the associated producers through democratic assemblies. The relations of production which were definitive of marxian socialism centrally involved democratic working class control of the means of production which were to become 'mere instruments of free and associated labour' (ibid: 290-291).

Luxemburg

Clearly it is not feasible to provide a detailed critical survey here of Luxemburg, Trotsky and Lenin's changing views of socialist democracy, nor of the evolving differences between them. Of the three, Luxemburg is most commonly recognized as being unequivocally committed to a radically democratic and pluralist vision of socialism. In this vein she argued that:

We [revolutionary socialists] have always distinguished the social kernel from the political form of *bourgeois* democracy; we have always revealed the hard kernel of social inequality and lack of freedom hidden under the sweet shell of formal equality and freedom - not in order to reject the latter but to spur the working class into not being satisfied with the shell, but rather, by conquering political power, to create a socialist democracy to replace bourgeois democracy- not to eliminate democracy altogether (1970: 393).

But socialist democracy is not something which begins only in the promised land after the foundations of socialist economy are created: 'it does not come as some sort of Christmas present for the worthy people who, in the interim, have loyally supported a handful of socialist dictators. Socialist democracy begins simultaneously with the beginnings of the destruction of class rule and of the construction of socialism' (1970: 394).

For Luxemburg socialist democracy was characterized by 'general elections', 'unrestricted freedom of press and assembly', and by the existence of a number of competing political parties: 'Freedom only for the supporters of the government, only for the members of one party - however numerous they may be - is no freedom at all. Freedom is always and exclusively freedom for the one who thinks differently' (ibid: 389).

Lenin

These statements appear in Luxemburg's blistering critique of what she called the 'Lenin-Trotsky theory' of socialist democracy. In this regard, it is widely accepted that many of Lenin's central ideas, particularly the concept of a vanguard party, and decisions following the October revolution, created the pre-conditions for the emergence of the Stalinist dictatorship during the 1920s. There are indeed some complex issues here and it is undeniable that both Lenin and Trotsky committed grave political errors during the Civil War period. But there can be no denying (at least by those capable of making an honest assessment of Lenin's writing on the issue prior to October 1917) that Lenin envisaged socialism as essentially a form of proletarian democracy.

For example, in *State and Revolution* Lenin is critical of the highly restrictive form of democracy in capitalist society. This critique still has considerable resonance today.

In capitalist society, providing it develops under the most favourable conditions, we have a more or less complete democracy in the democratic republic. But this democracy is always hemmed in by the narrow limits set by capitalist exploitation, and consequently always remains, in effect, a democracy for the minority, only for the propertied classes, only for the rich ... in the ordinary, peaceful course of events, the majority of the population is debarred from participation in public and political life (1968: 323).

The establishment of socialism, by contrast, involved 'an immense expansion of democracy, which for the first time becomes democracy for the poor, democracy for the people, and not democracy for the money-bags ...' (ibid: 324). In a similar vein, Lenin argues that 'democracy is of enormous importance to the working class in its struggle against the capitalists for its emancipation (ibid: 332)' and 'the way out of parliamentarism is not, of course, the abolition of representative institutions and the elective principle, but the conversion of the representative institutions from talking shops into "working" bodies' (ibid: 294). So wrote the leader of the Bolsheviks in August and September of 1917.

Trotsky

The final example I wish to cite in defence of my argument that democracy is central to the classical marxist vision of socialism is Trotsky's path breaking analysis of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution - *The Revolution Betrayed*. The significance of this book can hardly be overstated. It represents the first attempt to develop an historical materialist explanation of the revolution's degeneration and the rise of Stalin's dictatorship by one of the leading figures in that revolution. Despite its faults, and the analysis is flawed, the book affirms the classical marxist tradition by highlighting the extent to which Stalin's rise to power involved a fundamental break with the basic principles of that tradition.

Trotsky observed that 'The present regime in the Soviet Union provokes protest at every step, a protest the more burning in that it is repressed. The bureaucracy is not only a machine of compulsion but also a constant source of provocation. The very existence of a greedy, lying and cynical caste of rulers inevitably creates a hidden indignation' (1972: 284- 285). This situation was likely to lead to the revolutionary overthrow of the Stalinist regime. However, this revolution was not simply a matter of 'substituting one ruling clique for another, but of changing the very methods of administering the economy and guiding the culture of the country' (ibid: 289). Trotsky's commitment to the restoration of democracy can hardly be doubted:

Bureaucratic autocracy must give place to Soviet democracy. A restoration of the right of criticism, and a genuine freedom of elections, are necessary conditions for the further development of the country. This assumes a revival of the freedom of Soviet parties, beginning with the party of Bolsheviks, and a resurrection of the trade unions. The bringing of democracy into industry means a radical revision of plans in the interests of the toilers (ibid).

Unfortunately, the power of Trotsky's critique was severely undermined by his insistence that state ownership of the means of production combined with centralized planning meant that the Soviet

economy was in some sense 'socialist' . This involved a conflation of property ownership and relations of effective control. The notion that a 'political revolution' was all that was required to re-establish genuine socialism in Russia ignored the reality that a fundamental transformation of the relations of production was required.

In sum, it is a central contention of this article that a fair and open-minded analysis of the writings of the classical marxists will demonstrate that democracy was absolutely central to their vision of socialism. There are, of course, major differences between them on specific issues, their own positions were often complex and sometimes inconsistent, and there are important problems with some of their conceptual formulations. In addition, during the Civil War period both Lenin and Trotsky had an unfortunate propensity to justify measures that were enforced upon them by desperate material circumstances through the erection of highly dubious general principles. Consequently, it is important to recognize that arguing for the democratic credentials of classical marxism does not commit one to: (a) the assumption that because Marx, Lenin, Luxemburg or Trotsky wrote something that it must be true (arguing from authority); nor (b) that the classical marxist conceptualizations of socialist democracy are entirely adequate and non-problematical.

But what about the statues and murals?

Any open-minded observer cannot help but be struck by the dramatic contrast between the classical marxist vision of socialist democracy and the brutal reality of Stalinist dictatorship. But it is also true, unfortunately, that rhetoric and symbols which bear some resemblance to socialism were used to justify political and class rule in these repressive and dictatorial states. 'marxism-Leninism' was the dominant ideology in societies inhabited by one third of the world's population. Millions of workers in the West accepted the dominant ideological presentation of the Stalinist regimes as 'socialist', aided and abetted in this regard by the major social democratic and Western communist parties. The popular perception of the Eastern European revolutions in 1989 was indeed that socialism had failed.

So is it not the case that we should take heed of Blackburn's argument that because the rulers of these societies claimed to be socialists and communists, these societies were therefore in fact in some sense socialist and communist? This is an extremely feeble argument. Firstly, these rulers also claimed to be democrats and used the facade of elections and formally representative institutions to legitimize their rule. Why should we not, on these grounds, consider the German Democratic Republic, or any of the other Stalinist states, to be democratic as well as socialist? The obvious answer is that we do not consider these societies to be democratic, contrary to the claims of their rulers, precisely because in reality the political institutions in these societies were not democratic. If this is legitimate, then it is equally legitimate to deny that these were socialist on exactly the same grounds.

Secondly, Blackburn obviously considers statues and murals to be important things:

That Stalin was to be horrendously callous and a cynical traducer of marxism is also true. But we must take political doctrines and systems of belief as we find them not only at their face value; historical materialists should be the last to object to such a method. For example, Christianity cannot be judged by the doings of the saints but should also accept some responsibility for the actions of Christian governments and more generally the impact of Christian Europe on the world (1991: 178).

This amounts to little more than a restatement of the argument that the Stalinist regimes really were socialist in some sense, not only because of state ownership and central planning, but also because the dominant ideology was a form of socialism (Marxism-Leninism) derived from classical marxism (as should be clear by now, a highly contentious inference). Therefore Marx, Lenin and Trotsky, the members of the Left Opposition who died fighting the rising Stalinist bureaucracy, and other

socialists committed to the political ideals of classical marxism, all 'have some responsibility, direct or otherwise, for the practices of what used to be called 'actually existing socialism' (ibid).

The weakness of Blackburn's argument can be highlighted using his own analogy: Christianity. The US government consistently claims to be a 'Christian government' but do marxists base their criticisms of its domestic and international policies on the professed religiosity of successive presidents (or the society)? Of course not. Marxists stress the specifically capitalist and imperialist nature of the US state and have developed historical and materialist analyses, among other things, of the role played by the state in fostering capitalist development both domestically and internationally. And would any sensible marxist seriously claim that Christians inside the US campaigning against US intervention in Central and southern America should really be held 'responsible' in any meaningful sense for the actions of US sponsored dictatorships in these regions? (Lest this seems like an extreme example, remember that Blackburn is arguing that anti-Stalinist marxists are in some sense responsible for 'actually existing socialism').

Further, one of the striking features of capitalist class rule is the tremendous diversity of ideologies which can be deployed to legitimate this rule - Christianity and other major religions, fascism, conservatism, social democracy, and liberalism. One does not individuate social forms of production on the basis of the ideologies deployed to legitimate them, nor is the specific form of the state determined on this basis. In view of Blackburn's insistence that his own analysis is consistent with historical materialism, it is worth recalling Marx and Engels' insistence that historical materialism, in direct contrast to Hegelian idealism, undertakes analysis which ascends 'from earth to heaven':

That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor of men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process [sic]. ... Morality, religion, metaphysics, and all the rest of ideology as well as the forms of consciousness corresponding to these, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence (Marx and Engels, 1976: 42).

The point is that a marxist assessment of the allegedly 'socialist' nature of the Stalinist dictatorships should start out by analyzing the relations of production, process of surplus extraction, class formation and conflict, and so forth, and then on the basis of this analysis situate these social formations within the broad sweep of history. Compare this approach with Blackburn's argument that:

... for marxists to disclaim any responsibility whatever for [Stalinism] ... would be wrong. It would be wrong because the leaders of the Soviet state from Lenin to Gorbachev have appealed to Marx, have sought to organize political support for this state on the basis that they were marxists, and, at the subjective level, have believed that ... they acted in the furtherance of the socialist cause as they understood it (1991: 177).

The guts of this argument is simply that the dominant ideology in these societies was derived from classical marxism, therefore in some sense they were socialist. Perhaps this explains why Blackburn helped to build 'socialism' in Cuba by working for the Cuban Ministry of Soviet Trade during the 1960s?

Fortunately, the pessimism and despair which pervades *After the Fall* and so much contemporary academic marxist writing is unwarranted. It was not socialism which collapsed in 1989 but an historically specific form of bureaucratized state capitalism - a system which in reality always bore far greater similarities to the fascist regimes in Germany, Italy and Spain than it ever did to the underlying political principles of classical marxism. However, as Callinicos observes, this insistence on the centrality of the principles of working class self-emancipation and socialist democracy may appear to some as an evasive defensive manoeuvre, an attempt to dissociate the revolutionary socialist tradition from the catastrophe in the East.

This accusation fails ... to strike home. In the first place, it is just a matter of fact that there is a demonstrable difference between Marx's - and Lenin's - conception of socialism and the theory and practice of the Stalinist regimes. It is an entirely appropriate response to right-wing polemic to insist on that difference. Secondly . . . it was this conception of socialism which informed the strategies and interventions of those who actually led the October Revolution. It is an entirely legitimate form of historical interpretation to appraise the outcome of that Revolution in terms of its makers' self-understanding (1991: 18).

Isolation from the working class and concrete political practice

The main currents of western marxism all differ in at least one crucial respect from classical marxism: whereas the classical marxists were members of socialist organizations and politically active within the working class movements of their respective countries, contemporary marxists are firmly and safely ensconced within the universities. In this regard Frank Parkin has accurately observed that:

Contemporary western marxism, unlike its classical predecessor, is wholly the creation of academic social theorists - more specifically the creation of the new professoriate that rose up on the wave of university expansion in the 1960s. The natural constituency of this marxism is not, of course, the working class, but the massed ranks of undergraduate and postgraduate students in the social sciences; its content and design mark it out exclusively for use in the lecture theatre, the seminar room and the doctoral dissertation (Quoted by Callinicos, 1982: 21-22).

The Frankfurt School, Hegelian Marxists, Althusserian Structuralists, Analytical Marxists, Gramscian Marxists, the Regulation School, and so forth, are all schools of thought composed of university intellectuals writing texts for consumption by other intellectuals and students. These schools of thought all rest on a complete break between theory and practice. This stands in marked contrast with the general acceptance by classical marxism of Marx's second and eleventh theses on Feuerbach:

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question. In practice [women and men] must prove the truth, that is the reality and power, the this-sidedness of [his or her] thinking. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question. The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it (Marx and Engels, 1976: 28-30).

The problem of theoreticism, an almost exclusive preoccupation with abstract theory construction, is reinforced by the divorce of the contemporary academic marxist intelligentsia from political practice in the working class movement.⁶ By contrast, in the classical marxist tradition there is a close and ongoing interaction between theoretical debate and conceptual development, empirical and historical research, and concrete political practice. Involvement in practice enables: (a) intellectuals to learn from the working class movement - to absorb the lessons of working class struggles and to understand the concrete conditions of life of working class people; and (b) to test the applicability of theoretical ideas. Many of the characteristic intellectual and political weaknesses of western marxism arise because of the distance of these intellectuals from the world that exists beyond the parameters of the world's university campuses (and their specific location within the new middle classes of the advanced capitalist societies).

Western marxism is, therefore, academic marxism. As Callinicos observes, in the English speaking world there now exists a socialist intelligentsia of some size and significance:

Several factors came together to make this development possible: the expansion of higher education, especially in subjects such as sociology; the student movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s; the general atmosphere of crisis which has become ever more pervasive in the last fifteen years (1982: 21).

In this vein Perry Anderson observed of western marxism that 'the first and most fundamental of its characteristics has been the structural divorce of this marxism from political practice. The organic

unity of theory and practice realized in the classical generation of marxists before the First World War, who performed an inseparably political intellectual function within their respective parties in Eastern and Central Europe, was to be increasingly severed in the half-century from 1918 to 1968 in Western Europe' (1976: 29).

There are three major sets of reasons for the divorce of academic marxists from political practice; intellectual, political, and institutional. First, the currently intellectually dominant schools of marxist thought quite simply do not provide any kind of detailed programmatic guide for concrete political practice. Second, many intellectuals who did become politically active during the late 1960s and 1970s involved themselves in Stalinist organizations which lacked internal democracy and which declined in size and then finally collapsed in the late 1980s and early 1990s. This has left many socialist academics feeling burnt out and disillusioned about the whole project of building socialist organizations. This negative view of socialist organizing has been compounded by feminist critiques of socialist approaches to organizing. Third, the institutional setting of the university does create difficulties for those academics who become politically active socialists. This last point is worth exploring in a little more depth.

While it is certainly true that it is easier being a marxist within the university than it is being a marxist in other institutional settings (because of autonomy within the workplace, 'academic freedom', 'flexitime', and so forth), it would be erroneous to assume that a commitment, even of an exclusively intellectual nature, to marxism does not entail real risks and sacrifices. For example, post-graduate students who are marxists are more likely to encounter ideologically biased assessments of their theses by non-marxists, they are more likely to encounter difficulties in obtaining an academic position, they are, therefore, placed in the position of having to disguise their intellectual commitment to marxism in order to get a job. If a marxist does obtain an academic position, then she or he is less likely to have a contract renewed, be granted tenure, or be given a promotion. In addition, as marxists we must endure the hostility of our right-wing colleagues and the criticism of our right-wing students. For all of these reasons, most marxist intellectuals consider, and it must be said with considerable justification, that the very activities of writing and teaching from a marxist perspective, of presenting an 'alternative view' of our society, are inherently political.

For most 'going a step further' and becoming politically active on campus is just too threatening to be considered viable. It is to make oneself a marked woman or man: to invite hostility and ridicule from other members of academic staff and students, as well as to risk censure from the university administration. To sell a socialist newspaper on one's own campus is well and truly to stand up and be counted - to announce to the world: here I am, I'm a socialist, I'm proud of it!

There is, however, also a positive dimension to being involved in a socialist organization. First, and most obviously, the political and personal support and encouragement of those staff, students and workers who are members. Secondly, the intellectual stimulation provided by being part of a collective which combines political discussion, analysis, writing and action. Third, the satisfaction and the valuable experience acquired from involvement in campaigns, protests and strikes. Fourth, being forced to learn to express ideas in a way which is sufficiently clear to be understood by the majority of the population who have not had the benefit of a university education. Fifth, being able to assess political approaches (e.g., anarchism, feminism and socialism) according to the results when they are applied in practice through collective action.

Conclusion: Is there a future for marxism?

This article has identified and discussed three major problems which must be faced by all marxists in the 1990s: the continued popularity of perspectives, such as post-modernism, which are virulently anti-marxist and which emerged out of the general intellectual shift to the right during the 1980s; the impact of the collapse of Stalinism on the western marxist intelligentsia; and the 'structural divorce' of western marxism from political practice. No sombre and realistic assessment could

conclude, in light of these problems, that marxism has an easy future ahead of it. But, in my view, it certainly does have a future. The future of marxism lies in acknowledging the existence of these problems and in overcoming them through the critical and selective appropriation and reaffirmation of what is of value in classical marxism.

In essence, this essay is arguing for a revitalized new classical marxism in preference to any of the academic marxisms which are currently intellectually, although by no means politically, dominant. This is not to deny for a moment that there is a great deal of value in the Frankfurt School, or Analytical marxism, or the Regulation School, and so forth. Nor is it to assert that classical marxism is a nonproblematic tradition or, a fortiori, that the writings of the classical marxists should be treated as quasi-religious texts. But it is to argue that a marxism which is going to be adequate to the tasks of the future and which is going to exercise any kind of significant political influence outside the cloistered confines of the university must do the following.

First, it needs to move beyond the defensive preoccupations of the 'retreat period'.⁷ The ongoing critical rejection of marxism will always be a fact of life as long as capitalism remains economically, politically and ideologically dominant. Precisely because marxism provides the most thorough critique of capitalism, it will always be subject to an unending stream of criticism, abuse and slander from those intellectuals who are wedded to the status quo. If marxists wish to undertake positive research in any of the social sciences, they will have to be highly selective in deciding which of the currently fashionable criticisms of marxism are worthy of a response. This is not to recommend a close-minded dogmatic commitment to marxism but selectivity in determining which of these criticisms involve constructive and potentially fruitful critical engagement and which are simply ideologically motivated hogwash. For example, in my view the socialist-feminist, environmentalist, neo-weberian and analytical marxist critiques fall into the former category, while postmodernism is an example of the latter, amounting to little more than 'intellectual pollution'.

Second, as Callinicos, Geras, Miliband, Meiksins Wood and many others have convincingly argued, most of the central theoretical propositions of classical marxism remain sound. They should not be abandoned on the basis of fashionable arguments resting on weak scholarship.

Third, as marxists we must be clear and unambiguous on the question of Stalinism. The Stalinist regimes of Eastern Europe were in no substantial sense consistent with the classical marxist vision of socialism. Therefore the collapse of Stalinism does not represent a terminal crisis of marxism. Just as importantly this critique of Stalinism must be linked to a clear and unambiguous commitment to a pluralist socialist democracy.

Fourth, arguments that marxists need to 'import' a commitment to democracy from liberalism display a profound ignorance of classical marxism; the classical marxists all considered that the democratisation of society was central to the construction of socialism.

Fifth, the last thing marxism needs today is the 'umpteenth' reconstruction of historical materialism. The foundations have already been established, they require regular maintenance, not a complete overall. Theories should not be developed criticized rejected or modified without reference to systematic historical and/or empirical research, unless they can be shown to be logically incoherent.

Sixth, in a world racked by economic and environmental crises, war, starvation and poverty, by class, gender, ethnic and other inequalities, and the resurgence of fascism, it is not enough for academic marxists to merely write about socialist principles or to teach marxist theory - it is necessary to put these principles into practice. We already have an overabundance of philosophical interpretations of the world, we need more people who want to become actively involved in trying to change it.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Bronwyn Craig, Elizabeth Finnie, Sarah Heal and Laurel Hepburn in the research for, and writing of, this paper.
2. See for example, Molyneux who observes that: 'The one hundred years since Marx's death have seen the emergence of innumerable divergent and conflicting Marxisms' (1985: 7).
3. An extensive list of references is provided in a bibliographical appendix to an earlier version of this article. This has been cut because of the need for brevity.
4. This volume is characterized by an intellectual sectarianism exemplified by the failure of any of the contributors, as well as those who are regularly published in *New Left Review*, to acknowledge or discuss what is, without doubt, one of the most sophisticated intellectual responses to the East European revolutions from a Marxist perspective: Callinicos, (1991). This book was given the Distinguished Scholarship award by the Marxist Section of the American Sociological Association in 1992.
5. See the excellent discussion by Geras, (1986: 133-144).
6. It is also reinforced by the fact that a book is much more likely to have international appeal if it is of a theoretical nature, thus enhancing the prospects for academic promotion of the author (as well as being good for the ego!)
7. During the 1980s many of the best new classical Marxists were forced to fight a 'rearguard' action against an ideologically motivated onslaught by ex-Marxist intellectuals moving rightwards. Much of this criticism was based on extremely poor scholarship, as Geras (1990) has brilliantly shown. In my view it is well and truly time to bid a not very fond farewell to these 'fair weather friends' of socialism. Gouldner (1970: 15) once remarked in relation to the crisis of sociology, that there are those who live *for* sociology, and those who live *off* it. In exactly the same way, those who have been most vocal in proclaiming a 'crisis' of Marxism and condemning it are the very same people who were quite prepared to live off it when it was easy and fashionable to do so.

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