

*Dialectic of Defeat*  
*Contours of Western Marxism*

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## *Introduction*

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The literature on Marxism threatens to drown both the theory and its students. To the cynical it confirms the obsolescence of Marxism: It has fled the streets and factories for the halls and offices of the university. The struggle to publish replaces the class struggle. Academics jet to conferences to hawk competing brands of Marxism. A consumer's guide is required to stay abreast of the offerings and the recalls: structural Marxism, semiotic Marxism, feminist Marxism, hermeneutical Marxism, phenomenological Marxism, critical Marxism, and so on.

This is not surprising. Marxism is not immunized against its object. After a century of contact the critique of the commodity succumbs to the commodity. Marx quipped that the criminal augments the market by producing the professor of criminology, who produces the commodity, the textbook on criminal law.<sup>1</sup> Today the revolutionary joins the criminal. The briefly popular slogan "The revolution will not be televised" was optimistic. The revolution will be televised. Nonetheless, to recognize that Marxism has been made a commodity is no reason to write it off. It proves that Marxism does not escape the social conditions that it has always denounced as determinant.

Nor does "commodification" exhaust the vulnerability of Marxism to its own historical situation. Everywhere Marxism has assumed characteristics of its specific environments. A single, homogeneous Marxism belongs to the past. Marxism takes on the color, and sometimes the content, of its conditions. Marxism devolves into Marxisms. This diversity is not benign. The world map of Marxism includes academics and political parties, entire states and cemeteries. There are

Marxist revolutionaries and poets; there are also Marxist careerists, premiers, and executioners.<sup>2</sup> A common vocabulary, reality, and loyalty cease to exist. Boundaries between traditions and experiences rigidify.

Vital differences among the Marxisms encourage a theoretical resignation. Forms of Marxism are treated as distinct specimens or cases. Each Marxism is unique, with its own history, texts, leaders, accomplishments, and crimes. Yet it is too soon to settle for case studies and surrender general approaches. Moreover, allegiance to specific forms of Marxism can be sustained only by attention to the general context from which they emerged. In less abstract terms, this context was defined by its dominant variety, Soviet Marxism. Other Marxisms defined themselves, or were defined, by their distance from Soviet Marxism.

Today no study can avert its eyes from the dark shadows that fall upon Marxism. If civilization can be judged by its prisons, refugees, and victims, Marxism cannot claim exemption. The darkness is due not simply to its opponents but to its proponents. To deny this is to falsify in advance any critical inquiry into Marxism. The swagger of some Marxisms suggests – to borrow a phrase – that Stalinism has a great future. A contemporary study cannot afford to be neutral lest it collaborate in the misdeeds; it requires a critical evaluation of the fate of its subject.

“Fate” is a loaded word; it includes its own judgment. Those who finish on top write the histories and hand out the medals. That the victors sponsor the museums and textbooks to honor themselves is no longer a novel insight; it has guided much “revisionist” history that has reclaimed the silenced and defeated. Yet the full implications of this insight rarely have been pursued. For the defeated are victimized not only by the victors but by themselves. The losers also draw the lessons; and their lessons smack of an ethos that the victors cherish, the ethos of success.

Success: Both capitalists and Marxists speak its language. Bank presidents and revolutionaries bestow their highest honors on achievers. The exploiters and the exploited extol their winners. Lenin was an inconnu until he succeeded. Martov, the defeated Menshivik leader, remains one. It seems just that the long-suffering and defeated celebrate their few successes. They should honor Lenin instead of Martov,

or the Russian Revolution instead of the (defeated) Munich Soviet Republic. The smell of success sweetens the sourness of daily setbacks and insults.

Yet between honor and fetish are both a half-step and a chasm. Few boldly maintain the identity of success and truth; few resist its spell. Success confirms the truth of the theory; defeat is its own verdict. Failure bespeaks an erroneous theorizing. On the bottom line of the account book of Marxism, Leninism shows a net profit. For investor and revolutionary, successful performance is the best report.

Little has eviscerated Marxism more than its acceptance of the judgment of history as truth itself. The success of the Russian Revolution, and later the Chinese Revolution, dazzled generations of Marxists (and non-Marxists).<sup>3</sup> Conversely, the failure of other Marxisms, notably a distinct European Marxism, confirmed their inadequacy. Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and others attracted attention because of their successes. Attention could not be cleaved from imitation, however. Hence the model and theories of the Russian Revolution were not only exported but also enthusiastically imported by countless Marxists. That the subverters respected the judgment of reality is only proper; that they worshipped it crippled Marxism by substituting mimicry for thought.

To answer an immediate objection, no improvement transpires by flipping the conceptual coin. To progress from a fetish of victors to a fetish of defeated is progress in fetishism. If victory is not proof of truth, neither is defeat. Historical studies, as well as a political left, exhume the most oppressed and victimized as if they stood closer to truth. In the distribution of defeat, the most defeated are the most blessed. After his fourth exile and seventh flight in twenty years, Victor Serge in his great memoirs reminds us that the European left was not fated for defeat. "And we have known how to win, we must never forget that . . . No kind of predestination impels us to become the offal of concentration camps."<sup>4</sup>

Success and defeat are facts to be recognized, nothing more; they are mute, requiring interpretation and analysis. The "success" of the Russian Revolution does not prohibit evaluation. Marxism is not exhausted by the attainment and maintenance of state power. Engels, in a celebrated passage, commented that "the worst thing that can befall a leader of an extreme party is to be compelled to take over a government in an epoch when the movement is not yet ripe for the

domination of the class which he represents.”<sup>5</sup> This passage should not be used as glib judgment of the Russian Revolution; rather it recalls that success is not its own argument: Its limits, consequences, costs, and relevance elsewhere are open to scrutiny.

Defeat is also a fact; it registers the constellation of forces, not the quality of insight, theory, and even practices. These must be elicited from the dense web of events; they are not simply contiguous with the defeat itself. Moreover, success and defeat are not insular realities; they partake of each other. The success of Soviet Marxism contributed to, and often directed, the defeat of other Marxisms. To ascribe endless setbacks to Western Marxism and endless victories to Soviet Marxism, as if the Soviets did not suppress the opposition, confuses arson with faulty wiring. This is of course true for the opposition within Soviet Marxism. That Trotsky was defeated, and finally assassinated, is not a comment on his theories and writings but on power. Homage to success is homage to violence.

Capitalism fabricated the myth of individual success; the Marxists marketed their own brand. Formula and inspiration were built in. The instructions were simple: imitation. Hence every Leninist group in the world publishes a newspaper in accord with the instructions of Lenin’s *What Is to Be Done?* There is no denying that Lenin and the Bolsheviks came to power; one can question whether the same tactics can be replicated successfully in Western Europe and North America. Under the harsh rays of success, vivid differences in social conditions and history wash out. For several years in the 1960s and 1970s Maoism, a theory of peasant revolution and national liberation, flourished in Europe and North America. In the urban wildernesses of New York and Paris, Maoists championed poor peasants and land reform.

This book challenges the ethos of success that has drained off the critical impulse of Marxism; it seeks to salvage a Western Marxism that rarely knew victory. The history of Western Marxism does not resound with official proclamations and marching bands; it is the history of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg, the imprisonment of Antonio Gramsci, the exile of Karl Korsch, the flight of the Frankfurt School, and the fate of countless Marxists who bucked the current and paid the price. Again, defeat does not anoint the defeated; it only implies that the other side was stronger. Defeat may enclose future victories. Conversely, the ef-

fort to replicate distant victories – in time and space – may only perpetuate a past of defeats.

Is this the dialectic of defeat? Do the defeats of unorthodox Marxism harbor openings for the future? Do the successes of orthodox Marxism only mask its dismal record in the advanced capitalist countries? The achievements of the Russian Revolution need not be denigrated. Yet their evaluation cannot renounce history and society. The issue here is less the record of Soviet Marxism in the Soviet Union than its record in Western Europe and North America. As Fernando Claudin has convincingly argued, the balance sheet is not encouraging.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, neither victory nor defeat can be measured with a single transhistorical yardstick; they must be refracted through the specific historical possibilities. The defeats of all Marxists before nazism, for instance, were not monotonously identical. The possibilities open to the Western Marxists, by then isolated individuals, sharply differed from the options of the German Communist party, a major political formation.

If the reality of defeat undermined the spell of success, the spell could be renewed by a powerful amulet: science. The following chapters examine a Marxist challenge to the consecration of Marxism by science. That Marxism is a science is regularly, almost obsessively, restated in orthodox texts. Here Marxism is infatuated with the bourgeois society it despises. If Marxists wanted to expropriate the expropriators, they also fell in love with their instruments: science and technology. In these pages the question is less science itself than its uncritical adoption.

Marxists were convinced that they were the appointed and rightful heirs to the science of bourgeois society – a science that guaranteed success. The greatest insults in the standard Marxist dictionary were “prescientific,” “nonscientific,” “mystical,” “utopian,” and “romantic.” Vulnerability to these charges intimidated the Marxist critics of science. The suppressed critiques took their revenge. Marxism succumbed to science; it shriveled up into blueprints and state engineering. The most provocative interpretations of science migrated to those outside of the mainstream and to those outside of Marxism.

For the same reason, searching analyses of mass culture, leisure, and urban life found little nourishment in mainstream Marxism. Mesmerized by the glitter of science and progress, Marxists dreamed of new



proletarian owners and revolutionary commissars but not a fundamental restructuring. The will to revamp a class society did not flag, but the substitution of the proletariat for the bourgeoisie exhausted the theory and its hopes. The trappings of bourgeois society were left inviolate. Authentic conservatives, extinct nowadays, who were unsympathetic to the tempo of industrial life often advanced more penetrating insights into the “commodification” of daily life than did the Marxists.

To challenge Marxism as science does not encourage the occult or mysterious. The single alternative of science or the irrational is posed by the inflexible scientific mind. Rather the challenge is directed against a repressive concept of science, perhaps more accurately dubbed “scientism.” The strict natural sciences, elevated to the sole model of knowledge, censor critical thought. Anything that cannot be squeezed into scientific categories is proscribed or neglected.

Marxism not only yielded distinct schools and national traditions, but its covalent bonds weakened. The coherence of the original theory has often been overstated; nevertheless, during a century, Marx’s “critique of political economy” fractured into philosophy, politics, and economics. To each belonged a distinct history, a body of literature, and specialists. The cause of this was not only the intellectual division of labor, which rendered philosophers and economists incomprehensible to each other, but these developments of Marxist theory testified to a profound transformation of the social reality.

“The critique of political economy” expressed not only a reality but a hope that the idioms of philosophical consciousness and economic activity overlapped. As the twentieth century tossed up problems unanticipated by classical Marxism, the hope receded. The defeats of the European revolutions, socialism in one country and fascism in several, made the original economic vocabulary inadequate, although not necessarily inaccurate. For some decades Marxist economics languished as Marxists turned to other disciplines – philosophy, aesthetics, psychology, sociology – to supplement and reevaluate the original texts.

The focus in these pages on philosophy and politics, and not economics and politics, is not arbitrary; it is loyal to the projectory of Western Marxism.<sup>7</sup> As often noted, the major figures of Western Marxism have been philosophers – from Lukács to Sartre – not economists. The predominance of philosophical works signified not a retreat but an

advance to a reexamination of Marxism. Here I differ with Perry Anderson's deft *Considerations on Western Marxism*.<sup>8</sup> I do not view Western Marxism as an unfortunate detour from "classical" Marxism; nor do I look forward to its extinction. The myth of a heroic Marxism, harmonizing philosophy, economics, science, and praxis, overwhelms the feeble efforts to rethink Marxism.

Yet I do not mean to ratify, but to recognize, the distance between philosophy and politics; and I endeavor to establish some of the links. Philosophical Marxism incorporated an implicit, sometimes explicit, politics. In my account this is not simply an interesting postscript to the main story. Although not always visible, philosophical propositions pervaded political choices and tactics. The political antagonism between Western and Soviet Marxism was ultimately sustained, and regularly refired, by philosophical antagonisms.

These philosophical antagonisms had already coalesced in the nineteenth century. The reception of Hegel in Western Europe and Russia anticipated and infused later political differences. Nature, science, subjectivity, consciousness, and dialectics, interpreted in divergent modes, became conceptual templates for contending political practices. I argue that an index, if not a cause, for the separation of Western and Soviet Marxism was the reception of Engels as well as Hegel. Although it is frequently maintained that the critique of Engels commenced with Lukács, it originated at the turn of the century with earlier Western Marxists.

I should emphasize that I do want to simply indict Russian and Soviet Marxism for upholding a regressive scientific Marxism as if this were due to moral insensitivity or philosophical crudity. Philosophical differences cannot be ripped out of social and political contexts. The economic and political situation of the first Russian Marxists encouraged a Marxism that spoke to different imperatives than in Western Europe. The cult of science and objectivity resounded dissimilarly in Russia and Western Europe.

The examination of the reception of Hegel and Engels cannot be set off cleanly from an evaluation of texts. Recently in historical and literary studies the scrutiny of texts has become an obsession. Especially under the impact of French poststructural thought, a fetish of the text has been launched replete with a new and shifting vocabulary: discourse, parole, semiotics, grammatology, and so on. In the name of the

text, the context has again lapsed. To structural and poststructural thinkers, the mess of history – denounced as historicism – pollutes the purity of the method. By remaining glued to the text the hope is to escape being unglued by the world.

Yet the shadows that cling to Marxism cannot be dispelled solely by desk lamps. After a certain point a study of *Capital* can explain Stalinism as much as a study of the Bible can explain the Inquisition. A moratorium on textual studies is hardly necessary; a recognition of its limits and dangers may be. Although I make some brief forays into what Hegel, Marx, and Engels “actually said,” I am more concerned with their reception. Moreover, a sufficient, and growing, literature exists that dissects the texts and logic of Hegel and Marx.

This study is antiencyclopediaic; it does not seek to discuss all figures, movements, and eddies of Western Marxism commensurate with their importance. Where the existing literature is adequate, I have not hesitated to abridge my own discussion. This is most noticeable with Gramsci, whose presence in these pages does not correspond to his significance: Since reliable studies of Gramsci constantly augment, a full discussion would be tiresome. He is mentioned as a confirmation of the pattern of Western Marxism, and he enters these pages where he becomes a problem: in the exchange with Bordiga and the opposition to Soviet Marxism. The treatment of Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and French Marxism in general is brief for the same reason. Although I have not essayed a comprehensive narrative, I have tried to situate all the major figures and groups. I have been guided by two concerns: to examine those often slighted – the Dutch Marxists, Paul Levi, the German Communist Worker’s party (KAPD) – and to select events and concepts that sharpen the outlines of Western Marxism. The approach, finally, is guided by the material and argument.

A number of remaining decisions and difficulties informing this study should be mentioned. Vocabulary is not the least of them. If Marxism passes into Marxisms, exact designations lag behind. National and geographical classifications can be misleading: Soviet Marxism, Chinese Marxism, Yugoslavian Marxism, and so on. Forms of Marxism are clearly transnational. Soviet Marxism or orthodox Leninism appeared, exported and imported, everywhere. They became, and are used in this study as the official versions, the orthodoxy – and the benchmarks for evaluating all heresies. Western and European Marx-

ism are used interchangeably; they are also not rigorously geographical terms but refer to a body of thought and practice. Western Marxism appeared in several European countries; it is indigenous to advanced capitalism but is hardly the dominant form. For instance, Western Marxism in France is far overshadowed by the French Communist party, which with some strains continues to represent the orthodoxy.

Finally, any discussion of Western Marxism is incomplete without a consideration of its efforts to incorporate psychoanalytic thought. I surveyed some of these efforts in *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* and do not repeat my discussion here.<sup>9</sup> My aim in that work, however, differed, almost opposed, my aim here. In *Social Amnesia* I critically examined a post-Freudian psychology that succumbed to an overwhelming subjectivism. In a situation where the social noose is invisible and the gasps of the individual are recorded as cries of liberation, I recalled and defended an objective (or nonsubjective) theory of subjectivity.

Marxism hardly needs that lesson; objectivity is its watchword and opium. Yet the compulsive objectivity of orthodox Marxism is more compulsive than objective; it flees the subjective as if it were the threat it may be. Hence in these pages I recount the history of a Western Marxism that has not obliterated the individual or the subject. My concern, however, represents not a change of mind but a change of topics. To prize the formal logic of argument over the illogic of reality sacrifices thought to mechanics.