

The main sources of twenty-first-century Marxism

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It is no secret that the 20th century experiment in the construction of socialism has landed in a practical defeat, most importantly in the country of the Great October Revolution, the Soviet Union. There are of course very many results born from such an epoch-making development. The overall effect was a tremendous setback to socialism internationally. One of the more benign ones is the lifting of the barriers between societies living under different socio-economic and political conditions. No longer are there any “iron curtains” (to use a well-worn metaphor) in the theoretical and ideological fields. The 21st century will probably see, after a period of gestation, a worldwide reunification of Marxism as in late nineteenth century. But that reunification will be the result of a synthesis of as well as a struggle between the different Marxist traditions of the 20th century. A broad depiction of the main contenders for a place in the overall Marxism of the 21st century would be useful in order to understand the likely prospects. This is what I will try to discuss so as to remind fellow Marxists that many traps exist that might lead us to take the wrong road if we are not careful enough.

A warning at the beginning. Since we will be looking at the different strands of Marxism in the 20th century, we should admit from the beginning that our field

of investigation is immense. Even a book-length discussion will not suffice if one wishes to cover the entire field. This is obviously not what we intend to do in a fifteen-minute talk. We will not discuss schools of thought for instance. To cite some examples, Austro-Marxism (late 19th-early twentieth century Austria-Hungary) or the *Monthly Review* school (mid twentieth-century America) or the German state-derivation school (late twentieth century) etc. will not be dealt one by one. Nor will we dwell on particular political movements, revolutionary or otherwise. For instance, our object of discussion will not be Stalinism or Trotskyism or Maoism or Castroism. None of these would be devoid of interest. Schools of thought are relatively coherent formulations of Marxism that would be of interest to delve into, but there are too many of them. It is not possible to even enumerate all of them in such a short speech. As for political movements, everyone has an initial idea on them, though some of our ideas may turn out to be simply hearsay or prejudices. More importantly, the discussion may turn into partisan name-calling.

What I would like to offer to you is not a comparison of different views on what Marxism stands for. I would like to offer you a panorama of the different outlooks that have been in the forefront in four different geographic entities. Their views and sensibilities are not of course the result of geographical conditions but of definite socio-economic and political relationships and structures.

The four different constellations I would like to offer you are the following: Western Marxism; national-liberation Marxism; Soviet Marxism; and, finally, revolutionary Marxism.

Western Marxism

Marxism was obviously the product of Western Europe, the earliest homeland of the capitalist mode of production. The pioneers, Marx and Engels themselves, are from that region of the world. However as soon as the main theory and practice, in close unity, of the pioneers, were formulated in a systematic manner, the road of Western Marxism diverged into two different routes. On the one side was the wing that regarded Marxism as the theory and practice of revolution, a theory and practice with the class struggle and the modern proletariat at its epicenter, all other questions being taken up and arranged in their relation to that central core. Let me mention some names so as to make clear what wing I am talking about: Rosa Luxemburg, Clara Zetkin, Antonio Gramsci, György Lukács or Bertolt Brecht (whom I consider to be a philosopher as well as a playwright and poet). These are some prominent examples.

Another wing moved out into a wider foray, trying to use the tools of dialectical materialism, not always very faithfully, into psychology, questions of the libido, arts and music, religion etc. etc. The most important circle here is the Frankfurt

School (Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and many other celebrities, of which the name of Herbert Marcuse must be mentioned because he had such great impact on the youth of 1968). This then turned into what is now called “Critical Theory”. The distancing of this school of Marxism from class struggle and the proletariat ended in the replacement of the proletariat as the agent of change by the student youth!

It is not that the first wing did not take any interest in fields outside of class struggle. Quite the contrary. Clara Zetkin devoted years and years to the question of women’s emancipation. Gramsci discussed fervently the national question in Italy or the role of superstitions among the people or many other things. Brecht was obviously interested, as a poet and a playwright, in everything. But whatever they took up, they ultimately connected its significance to class struggle and revolution.

Now, it is important to point out that the Frankfurt School, after it turned into “critical theory”, was ripe to fuse with postmodernism after the 1970s. One of the main warnings of this speech will be this: Beware of those who push postmodernist ideas in the guise of Marxism. The key name here is Frederic Jameson, who presented postmodernism as an organic growth of a new stage of capitalism, thus giving that obscurantist school of thinking credibility among Marxists.

Now postmodernism is of different kinds. There is Foucault and his most influential follower Judith Butler or the post-Marxism of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe or the globalism of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. What one should watch out for is this: All these different strands of present-day social theory pretend they are a continuation and improvement of Marxism, but destroy the very basis of Marxism, by negating the importance of class struggle, the central historic role of the proletariat, the necessity of revolution and the existence of imperialism to be fought.

There is a third strand of Western Marxism. The excellent historians of Britain (E. Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson, I. Deutscher, C. Hill etc.), France (Albert Soboul, Daniel Guérin etc.), Germany (for instance Wolfgang Abendroth) and other countries have contributed immensely to Marxism and deserve their fame and prestige among Marxists of all countries.

National-liberation Marxism

We now come to the second source from which the Marxism of the 21st century may flow forth. This second source offers the benefit of being a corrective to the wing of Western Marxism typified by the Frankfurt School that delved into problems peculiar to advanced capitalist-imperialist societies and simply ignored relations of oppression flowing from the rise of imperialism and colonialism and the struggles born thereof.

There are two different strands of thinking in national-liberation Marxism. One deals with the economic bases of this new phenomenon, The basis of this strand of Marxism lies, of course, in the theory of imperialism developed by second-generation Marxists of the school that we call revolutionary Marxism, to which we will come at the end of this paper, whose most important representatives in the area of the theory of imperialism are obviously Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. National-liberation took over some of the ideas of the theory of imperialism and developed them in directions that were relevant for the other side of the equation, i.e. the countries oppressed by imperialism. Authors such as those of the Latin American dependency school, Andre Gunder Frank, and Samir Amin are the main representatives.

There is also another variant that delves deeper into questions of colonial psychology, of the cultural peculiarities of colonial society and the route to be taken by the artists of such societies, and the interconnection between anti-imperialist struggles and the fight for socialism. Franz Fanon, C.L.R. James, Juan Antonio Mella, José Carlos Mariátegui, Mao Zedong, and Ho Chi Minh are some of the prominent figures here.

Although many views of the national-liberation Marxism of the twentieth century may be found wanting or plain wrong, we are of the opinion that, given the continuing inequalities and relations of oppression that exist between different types of societies in the world and, in many cases, even different peoples within the borders of the same country, this school has an immense contribution to make to the Marxism of the 21st century.

Soviet Marxism

The contribution of Soviet Marxism to Marxism at the international level is something yet to be discovered by those of us that have remained outside of the Soviet experience. It is thinkers, academics and fighters for socialism with whom we share this conference who are best-placed to reveal for us in the rest of the world the secrets of Soviet Marxism. Nonetheless, let us say a few words, with humility, on the general lines of the historical formation of Soviet Marxism that may provide clues for all of us.

It is of vital importance to start from two very important facts. One is the fact that Soviet Marxism has its roots in the Marxism of Lenin and the Bolsheviks, whose Marxism we will be taking up below under the rubric of “revolutionary Marxism”. This very fact creates room for hope in the achievements of Soviet Marxism. Added to this comes the additional positive factor that flows from Marxism being the main philosophical and ideological world view through which all the sciences, natural and social, were viewed in Soviet times.

That is the positive side. However, there is also a very negative factor that went into the formation of Soviet Marxism. That is the transformation of Marxism from a universalist theory and ideology into a nationally limited one. Stalinist leadership and rule did not only imply terror and oppression. That would be a very limited view of what happened in the Soviet Union after Lenin's death. Stalinist leadership meant, first and foremost, abandoning world revolution as the condition for the final triumph of socialism and the construction of a classless society. It involved the replacement of the internationalism of Marxism and Leninism by a novel outlook that can best be described as "national communism". It is, first and foremost, the duty of the Marxists of those nations that went through the Soviet experience to distinguish between these two influences in the formation of Soviet Marxism.

Allow me to make an observation that may help us to distinguish between the Leninist brand of Marxism, on the one hand, and Stalinism on the other. Over the years of my very fruitful exchange with Russian Marxists, I have observed that for them Dimitrov's theory of fascism is non-negotiable, that they immediately refer to that concept of fascism, even if their personal attitude towards the Stalin period is critical in the extreme. However, Dimitrov's definition of fascism is in fact not a *theoretical* construct as we would understand it from the Marxist point of view but an instrumentalist ideological construct. It instrumentalizes Marxist class struggle theory by implying, *sotto voce*, that imperialist fractions of capital exist that are anti-fascist, *with which the Soviet Union could form alliances*. This is simply the intellectual justification for the popular fronts, such as those in Spain and France, that were formed before the next period of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact set in. This is not a scientific theory of fascism but a definition made up for purposes of political justification. This is a very clear example of one of the decisive characteristics of Soviet Marxism.

So, although I insist that the contributions and the shortcomings of Soviet Marxism can only be fully assessed, in the last analysis, by Marxists who have experienced the Soviet intellectual climate, I would simply warn our comrades here that not all that shines is gold.

Revolutionary Marxism

I will not dwell long on revolutionary Marxism. The reason is not that it is unimportant. On the contrary the reason is that it is indispensable.

Let me first give very brief information on the genesis of the concept revolutionary Marxism. This is a concept coined by Lenin. He used it against all the phony Marxisms of his age, first in Russia and then internationally. In other words, he used it to distinguish the genuine Marxism of his own Bolshevik Party (and movements parallel to it, such as the Spartacists of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht in

Germany) from those trends represented by Karl Kautsky or Edouard Bernstein or the Mensheviks in Russia that were Marxist in name but liberal in reality.

Revolutionary Marxism did not of course come to an end with the death of Lenin. Since “national communism” got the upper hand in the Soviet Union as a new social stratum that would best be characterised as “workers’ bureaucracy” rose to dominate the state under the socio-economic relations of state property over the large means of production and circulation, coupled with central planning, those tendencies within Bolshevism that insisted on the internationalism of the revolutionary Marxist programme organised against this new turn. This is what gave rise to the Fourth International after the bureaucracy won the political struggle. Throughout the rest of the 20th century, it was the Fourth Internationalist movement, first briefly under Trotsky’s leadership and later without him, that fought for the continuity of revolutionary Marxism. One should also include within the field of revolutionary Marxism the attempts, until the death of Che Guevara, of the Cuban leadership to further world revolution, mostly in the so-called “Third World”.

We do not have time to discuss at length either the main characteristics and propositions of revolutionary Marxism or its achievements. I will only very emphatically dwell on two points: first, I said above that the different versions of postmodernism “pretend they are a continuation and improvement of Marxism, but destroy the very basis of Marxism, by negating the importance of class struggle, the central historic role of the proletariat, the necessity of revolution and the existence of imperialism to be fought.”

And, second, add to these four points what I said about the Stalinist brand of Soviet Marxism: “the replacement of the internationalism of Marxism and Leninism by a novel outlook that can best be described as ‘national communism’”.

These five points necessarily interconnected to each other are the hallmarks of revolutionary Marxism.

This, then, is the central message of my presentation: let a hundred flowers bloom in constructing 21st century Marxism, but never sacrifice the centrality of the following five points: class struggle, the historic role of the proletariat, the necessity of revolution, unbending anti-imperialism, and proletarian internationalism.

Any theory that negates one or more of these points is incompatible with the emancipation of humanity, this century or beyond. Marxism, on the contrary, is the theory and programme of universal human emancipation.