

# Twelve theses on the crisis of “really existing socialism”

Thursday 14 December 2006, by [LÖWY Michael](#) (Date first published: May 1991).

1. One cannot die before being born. Communism is not dead, it is not yet born. The same applies to socialism. What the Western media call “the Communist States” and the Eastern official ideology “really existing socialism” were neither. At best, one could call them “non-capitalist societies,” where private property in the main means of production had been abolished. But they were very far from socialism—a form of society where the associated producers are the masters of the process of production, a society based on the largest economic, social, and political democracy, a commonwealth liberated from all class, ethnic, and gender exploitation and oppression. Whatever their economic and social achievements or failures, these “really existing” societies had one basic common shortcoming: the lack of democracy, the exclusion of the workers, of the majority of the people, from political power.

The democratic rights—freedom of expression and organization, universal suffrage, political pluralism—are not mere “bourgeois institutions,” but hard-won conquests of the labor movement. Their curtailment in the name of socialism is bureaucratic despotism. As Rosa Luxemburg (who actively supported the Russian Revolution) warned in a fraternal criticism of the Bolsheviks in 1918: Without general elections, without a free struggle of opinion, life dies out in every public institution, becomes a mere semblance of life, in which only the bureaucracy remains an active element.” Although some aspects of pluralism and workers’ democracy still existed during the years 1918-1923, increasingly authoritarian measures were taken. This mistake—together with the backwardness, civil war, famine, and foreign intervention in the USSR during these years—created the conditions for the appearance of the bureaucratic malignancy which, under Stalin, destroyed the Bolshevik Party and its historical leadership.

2. What the conservative or liberal media call “the death of communism” is in fact the crisis of the authoritarian and bureaucratic system of development first established in the USSR in the 1920s and 1930s on the ashes of the Russian Revolution. It is a model which had already been criticized and rejected in the name of Marxism by a whole generation of radicals, including Leon Trotsky and Christian Rakovsky, Isaac Deutscher and Abraham Leon, Heinrich Brandler and Willy Muenzenberg, Victor Serge and Andre Breton.

What is moribund and dying in Eastern Europe is not “Communism” but its bureaucratic caricature: the monopoly of power by the nomenklatura

3. This crisis is unfolding also in the USSR in a more contradictory form. After several decades of immobility and bureaucratic stagnation, a vigorous process of demolition of the Stalinist heritage took place, whose moving force was the dialectic between reforms from above—promoted by Mikhail Gorbachev and his collaborators—and the democratic movement from below—the Popular Fronts, and socialist, ecological, and reform clubs.

The politics of reform implemented by the new Soviet leadership is a mixed blessing, combining a remarkable political opening (glasnost) with a market-oriented economic restructuring (perestroika) which endangers some of the traditional rights of workers, and some very positive initiatives for

nuclear disarmament with a substantial reduction of support for third world revolutions (particularly in Central America).

4. In the political and social struggle which is developing in the USSR and the other non-capitalist societies, both inside the nomenklatura and in civil society, several alternatives confront each other in the search for a way out of the Stalinist model: (a) the conservation of the authoritarian political system combined with significant market-oriented reforms the Deng Xiaoping model, (b) the relative democratization of political structures and the introduction of market mechanisms in the economic management-the USSR, Bulgaria, Romania, (c) a democratization according to the Western model and the generalization of the market economy-that is, the restoration of capitalism-as in other Eastern European countries, (d) the thorough democratization of political power and a socialist/democratic planning of the economy-the program of radical trade unionists and socialist oppositionists, not implemented anywhere as of yet.

5. There is not much room for optimism about the outcome of the struggle, at least in the short run. In most of the East European countries, the radical movements which struggle for the socialist/democratic alternative, or claim some link to the Marxist tradition have been defeated, even those with a history of bitter opposition to the bureaucratic system. A common element, in addition to reasons specific to each country, explains this setback: during forty years, socialism and Marxism had been identified with the Stalinist bureaucratic system. That had been the only point of agreement between propagandists of the Eastern governments and their Western antagonists, between Radio Prague and Radio Free Europe-that these states are Socialists, that their leaders are implementing Marxist politics. Confronted with such a unanimous and formidable consensus, what weight could the opinion of a small group of Marxist dissidents have?

Western propaganda is, of course, trying to exploit this situation for its own aims. Nobody would make Descartes responsible for the French colonial wars, nor Jesus for the Inquisition, even less Thomas Jefferson for the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. But it has been made to seem that Karl Marx built the Berlin Wall and nominated Ceaucescu the leader of the Romanian Communist Party.

6. There is no reason to accept the contention, presented as a kind of self-evident truth by establishment economists, neo-liberal ideologues, Western political leaders, and mainstream editorialists that the market economy, capitalism, and the profit system are the only possible alternative to the failed totalitarian command economy which existed in the non-capitalist countries-a system where a small group of (incompetent) technocrats decided what to do with the economy and despotically imposed their decisions on the society. Tertium datur there is another road, the democratic planning of the economy by the society, where the people decide, after a pluralist and open debate, the main economic choices, the priorities of investment, the general lines of economic policy-that is, socialist democracy.

7. The dogma, implied by many reformist economists and leaders of Eastern countries, that there is a direct and logical link between market-oriented economic reforms and political democracy, economic "freedom" and political freedom. Deng Xiaoping's model is a good counter-example, as are the many third world countries which combine neoliberal economies with extremely authoritarian forms of state power. Moreover, the recent Chinese experience shows that although market-oriented reforms can temporarily solve certain difficulties created by bureaucratic centralized planning, it generates new and equally serious problems: unemployment, rural exodus, corruption, inflation, growing social inequalities, decline in social services, growth of criminality, subordination of the economy to the multinational banks.

8. The crimes committed in the name of communism and socialism by the bureaucratic regimes-from the bloody purges of the 1930s to the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968-have deeply injured the

very idea of a socialist future and reinforced bourgeois ideology among large sections of the population, both in the East and West. However, the aspirations for a free and egalitarian society, for social and economic democracy, for self-administration and control from below, are deeply rooted among significant parts of the working class and youth, both in the East and West. From this standpoint, socialism and communism, not as an “existing” state, but as a program which has inspired emancipatory struggles of the victims of capitalism and imperialism for a century and a half will remain alive as long as exploitation and oppression.

9. Understandably, in the present situation of crisis, one can find among many leftists a deep state of ideological confusion, disarray, and perplexity. Even those who are not yet ready to give away the whole Marxist heritage are preparing themselves for a retreat in good order. The dominant tendency on the left, both East and West-with the exception of a few heretics who still believe in the need for social revolution-argues for “modernizing” Marxism, adapting it to the ruling ideas, to liberalism, to individualism, to positivism, and above all to the market, its idols, its rituals, and its dogmas. In this view, the failure of “really existing socialism” has its origins in the attempt of the Russian Revolution to break away (at least partially) from the model of capitalist civilization, from the world market; the modernization of Marxism would therefore imply a certain return to the canons of the Western social and economic system. The social-democratization of several communist parties, both in the East and West, is one of the major forms of this attempt to dilute the socialist program. What is being thrown away with the (extremely) dirty bath water-the anti-democratic, bureaucratic, often totalitarian nature of the non-capitalist societies and of their system of centralized planning-is the baby-the idea of moving beyond capitalism toward a democratically planned economy. What are put forward in this attempt at “reconciliation with reality” (to use a venerable Hegelian formula) are not the universal values negated or perverted by Stalinism-democracy, human rights, freedom of expression, social equality, solidarity-but those publicized by Western elites-“free competition,” “free enterprise,” monetarism, market culture.

10. There is no doubt that Marxism needs to be questioned, criticized, and renewed, but this should be done exactly for the opposite reason from that given by its bourgeois critics: because its break with the productivist pattern of industrial capitalism and with the foundations of the modern bourgeois civilization was not sufficiently radical. Marx and Marxists have often walked in the footsteps of the ideology of progress typical of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly in presenting the development of productive forces as the objective foundation of the revolution and as the main argument legitimating socialism. In certain forms of vulgar Marxism, the supreme aim of the social revolution is not a fraternal and egalitarian reorganization of society, not a “utopia” with a new way of producing and living, with productive forces of a qualitatively different nature, but simply to remove those relations of production which are obstacles to the free development of productive forces. One can hardly find in *Das Kapital*-excepting one or two phrases-any elements for understanding that the “growth of productive forces” can endanger human survival by threatening to destroy the natural environment.

As a social scientist Marx did not always transcend the bourgeois/positivist model, based on the arbitrary extension to the historical sphere of the epistemological paradigm of the natural sciences, with its laws, its determinism, its purely objective predictions, and linear development-a tendency pushed to its logical conclusions by a certain kind of Marxism, from Plekhanov to Louis Althusser.

11. The essence of Marxism is elsewhere-in the philosophy of praxis and the dialectical materialist method, in the analysis of commodity fetishism and of capitalist alienation, in the perspective of the workers’ revolutionary self-emancipation and in the utopia of a classless and stateless society. This is the reason why Marxism holds an extraordinary potential for critical and subversive thought and action. The renewal of Marxism must start with a humanist, democratic, revolutionary, dialectical heritage to be found in Marx and his best followers, Luxemburg, Trotsky, and Gramsci among

others, a tradition which was defeated during the 1920s and 1930s by counterrevolution, Stalinism, and fascism.

Moreover, in order to radicalize its break with bourgeois civilization, Marxism must be able to integrate the practical and theoretical challenges raised by the ecology and feminist movements, liberation theology, and pacifism. This requires the vision of a new civilization, which would not be just a more progressive version of the industrial capitalist system based on state-controlled development of the same productive forces, but a new way of life, based on use-value and democratic planning; renewable energies and ecological care; race and gender equality; fraternity, sorority, and international solidarity.

The present worldwide triumph of neo-liberalism and bourgeois modernization results from the impossibility of both Social Democracy and post-Stalinism to offer a significant—that is both a radical and democratic—alternative to the world capitalist system.

12. More than ever, Marxism must be, as Marx suggested, the ruthless criticism of all that exists. " Rejecting the modernist apologies for the established order, the realistic discourses legitimizing the capitalist market or bureaucratic despotism, Marxism represents what Bloch called the Principle of Hope, the utopia of an emancipated society.

But it has no ready made answer to all the questions of the transition to socialism: how to combine representative and direct democracy, how to articulate democratic planning with the inevitable relics of the market, how to reconcile economic growth with ecological imperatives. Nobody can claim to have the monopoly of truth; these questions call for open and pluralistic debate in a process of mutual learning.

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\* From the Monthly Review, May 1991.