

Why Marxism?

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Just before I left Paris I got a book from Michael Lowy with a new preface and a quotation I want to share with you. It said "Marx is definitely dead for humankind." Come on Daniel, you will object, did you have to travel all the way to give us that tripe we can get here for a penny a dozen! But it's not your tripe. It comes from Italy. It is by Benedetto Croce from 1907 and it's exactly ninety years old. I have quoted it to remind you that grave-diggers of Marx - the new philosophers, the Fukuyamas - have plenty of ancestors and will have plenty of successors and it's not worth while spending much time refuting their paid or unpaid funeral orations. The one point I want to mention is the coincidence between the recent revival of such requiems and the fall of the Soviet Union.

This is the first point. The second and for me crucial one is that what the movement now needs, particularly in western Europe where the confrontation is reaching a vital stage, is not only a radical, but a global, comprehensive alternative to the existing capitalist system. This will bring me to my third point, namely the extent to which those who not just insist on the separate nature of various social movements but idealize that separation, who reject global, collective action because anything total is totalitarian; to what extent, wittingly or unwittingly, they serve the ruling establishment. Finally, depending on the time left, I shall say something about the Marxism that we here in the hall want to see revived and developed and the Marxism we are glad to see dead and buried. I mean the sacred book of the Soviet rulers, with the appropriate quotations for every occasion, provided by the official preachers of Marxism-Leninism who, you may have noticed, have conveniently converted to the capitalist gospel according to Milton Friedman.

So let us start with the latest fashion of funerals of Marxism. I find it puzzling that it should have been precipitated by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. That the establishment should take advantage to proclaim that Marxism, socialism, revolution, name it, are now gone forever; this is perfectly natural. But quite a lot of people on the Left, in progressive circles, were also clearly bewildered and this is what I cannot quite understand. In 1956, the year of Khrushchev's indictment of Stalin and of the invasion of Hungary, the shock of the believers made sense, as it did even in 1968 after the Soviet tanks entered Prague. But twenty years later nobody seriously believed that a socialist alternative was being forged in the Soviet block.

To those who merely want to score propaganda points it is easy to reply that only what has lived can die, that socialism therefore could never die in the East, that there Marx's associated producers were at no stage the masters of their factories and of their fate. But this is not enough. We had no model, but we have a heritage and we have to analyze its history in Marxist fashion. What went wrong and why? Was it because very rapidly the revolution was turned into a transformation from above? Or was it doomed in any case when, having happened in backward Russia, it failed to spread? I shall leave this unfinished but not unnecessary debate for the moment and turn to my second point.

Paradoxically, the collapse of the neo-Stalinist model did not coincide with the success of social-democracy. On the contrary, it coincided with its bankruptcy. Triumphant, capitalism showed itself in its nakedness. It was no longer capitalism with a human face, but back to the laws of the jungle. After twenty years or so of restructuring, the crisis is coming to a head. This is particularly striking in western Europe, where I live. We are watching a strange period of transition, with its hopes and

its dangers. For several years now, efforts are being made to impose the American model, not the American dream of yesteryear but the American nightmare. An attack is being waged against the so-called welfare state, against all the postwar conquests of the labor movement and the concessions to which capital had consented.

The parties of the respectful left, respectful that is of the established order: Tony Blair, who will soon take over in Britain or the ex-Communist Massimo d'Alema, the inspirer of the ruling coalition in Italy, are ready for all the sacrifices to the new gods of globalization. But the working people, particularly in continental Europe are not. Since 1994 successive attempts to cut the social services in Italy, in France, in Germany have met popular resistance. I personally think that the strikes and demonstrations of 1995, the French winter of discontent, will go down as an ideological turning point. After a quarter of a century of an ideological swing to the right, here was a movement mocking the blackmail: there is no alternative. Its message, frightening for the preachers of the establishment, was plain: if this is the future you are offering to us and to our children, then the hell with your future!

And yet the resistance, for the moment, is only resistance and not the beginning of a counter-offensive. It is followed by concessions and compromises. And it is bound to be so. The importance of the refusal cannot be overestimated. You cannot start building the future without this act of refusal. But it is on this negative platform that you must start forging an alternative. You must begin by fighting on the ground of your enemy - you would be a sect if you didn't, but you must inevitably offer solutions which take you beyond that territory, beyond the confines of existing society. Capitalism is a system with its own coherence, its logic - Meszaros would say with its own metabolism - and it can only be ultimately defeated by another system with a logic and coherence of its own. This does not mean storming the Bastille or seizing the Winter Palace. There is nothing instant about revolutionary change, which will require time, retreats as well as advance, and even occasional concessions. As things stand you may have explosions or even rebellions. But one cannot imagine a long-term, hegemonic movement without the vision of a fundamentally different society.

This is where I part company with current fashions, with post-modernity and all that. I have no problem with deconstruction as such. It reminds me of the picture in my philosophy textbook, as a schoolboy, of Descartes with his foot on a pile of books proclaiming: never to accept a thing to be true before having proved it is so. Or, of Gramsci's dictum, by now cliché, that truth is revolutionary. In revealing the tremendous racial, gender - less often class - bias hidden beneath the great declarations of principles of our pundits and preachers, the deconstructionists are attacking and undermining the system. But, at the same time, as post-modernists, they are coming to its rescue, condemning not only grand narratives but the very idea of a coherent, systematic alternative to capitalism. And the rescue is thus much more important than the attack because the capitalist system can put up with all sorts of uncoordinated, sporadic assaults. The only thing it has really to fear is a coherent, frontal offensive.

Let me be quite clear. I am in no way criticizing the social movements - the struggle against racism, against gender oppression or the struggle for ecological survival. Indeed, I take the fact that all such struggles should have developed outside its ranks as a sign of the bankruptcy of the socialist movement in the 20th century. I am simply attacking those who, far from deploring the fragmented nature of the movement, are into fragmentation as a permanent fact of life and make a virtue of division. Whatever the current fashions and fads, I think they will have to revise their ideas or be swept aside as the social movement resumes and develops its all-out offensive.

There remains the question: why Marxism? The crude answer is that the reign of capital is more absolute than ever and Marxism still remains the best instrument for analyzing its rule, its nature and its inner contradictions. On condition that we do not turn it into a Holy Scripture. I already said

how delighted we all here are with the dismissal of the distorted doctrine which served as a tool and a disguise for the Soviet rulers, exploiters, and their servants. But that is not enough. We cannot treat Marxism as a sacred text and cannot tolerate any taboos. Marx did not say everything. He didn't have time, to give just one example, to deal adequately with such a key question as the role of the State. However farsighted he was, he probably could not imagine that after a century and a half of tremendous technological change we would still be living under capitalism and, therefore, facing a clash between the blind development of productive forces and our environment; in other words, facing the threat of our suicide.

To cut it short, we must use Marxism in Marxist fashion: adapting it all the time to the realities of our age, questioning permanently not only our fast-altering environment, but the very premises of our own thought, examining for instance the changing nature of the working class and, therefore, its capacity to act as an agency of historical transformation.

Only in this fashion shall we be able to tackle the issues on our agenda: the problem of work, and not just of labor and leisure, in our society where technological progress seems to bring unemployment and or poverty; the problem of radical change and the frontiers of the nation-state in an artificially globalized society; the problem of equality in a world of growing social injustice; the problem of democracy, not only because of our terrible heritage, but because we want to transform the indispensable planning into the self-organization of society.

I could go on. The task is plainly immense and therefore, requiring time. But it is also urgent. I really do feel that there are rays of hope again on the horizon, the first signs of an awakening from Paris to Seoul. But there are also shadows. When the xenophobic National Front can conquer a city hall in southern France through universal suffrage, by an absolute majority, it is high time to do something, to offer the discontented people a radical alternative. If we don't, they will, and it will be both reactionary and irrational. But we can and, therefore, we must and Marxism is a precious tool at our disposal.

P.S.

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