

"After Socialism": Sad Outcomes

# Marxism survives Kolko's attack

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**Phil Hearse reviews Gabriel Kolko's *After Socialism - Reconstructing Critical Social Thought*, Routledge, 2006.**

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Radical critics of United States imperialism owe Gabriel Kolko a considerable debt. Of the 'revisionist' historians that emerged in the North America in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Kolko produced one of the most sustained and coherent accounts of the material basis of America's dash to globalism, and indeed explained why the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the 'century of war'.

In particular, his book *Main Currents in Modern American History* [1] deploys a mountain of empirical evidence, together with deft analytical skill to show that, contrary to many appearances, the post first world war period was one of an emerging crisis for the US capitalist class as domestic profitability faltered. Seeking more profitable outlets for the accumulated capital surplus, the American bourgeoisie made a decisive international turn - consolidated by the Second World War and its aftermath. Which explains why there wasn't a single US soldier on active service on foreign soil in 1938, and why there are something like two million today.

Kolko was a champion of the Vietnamese Revolution, and wrote a long account of the struggle of the Vietnamese Communist Party against the United States, leading to its eventual victory in 1975. This was an engagement which eventually went sour for Kolko, leading to his 1996 book, *Vietnam - Anatomy of Peace*, which shows his bitter disillusion with the post-war VCP and its eventual turn towards corruption and capitalism.

Kolko is of course a sharp critic of the present phase of Bush's 'new imperialism', but his exact political position has always been unclear, although there were emerging clues in his bitter dismissal of 'Leninism' in his *Vietnam - Anatomy of Peace*.

In *After Socialism* however, Kolko gets out the Full Monty and fires round after polemical round of buckshot at Marxism and all forms of socialism, demanding instead that we refound a radical critique of capitalism on the basis of 'reason'. In a quite astonishingly embittered tirade Kolko, knowingly or otherwise, repeats some of the most exaggerated polemics made by right-wing critics of Marxism. Equally astonishing is his willingness to provide almost nothing by way of a replacement for Marxism and socialism, and excuses himself with that lamest of canards - first we have to clear away the rubbish before we build an alternative. Why Kolko has gone down this route one can only guess, and indeed at the end I will hazard a guess. Meantime, let's look at some of his basic

arguments.

## Bloody Hegel

Kolko takes the axe to the root by going after key post-Enlightenment thinkers, in the first place Hegel. By following Hegel's mumbo-jumbo nonsense about 'dialectics', Marx inevitably mired his own schema in total obscurity and contradictory arguments, which make his writing almost unreadable and incomprehensible:

*"From its very inception, Marxism was plagued by obscurity. Hegel's mysticism always suffused Marxism's schema and its attempts to add force to its economics. Marx...could not divorce Marxism from its original inspiration in German philosophy, which added countless layers of analytical obscurity to an already overloaded theoretical formulation."* (p21)

Moreover:

*"The goals that socialists advocated and the reason for them could have been far simpler and more easily expressed and defended, but socialism from its inception was hobbled with an incomprehensible Marxist method and mysticism."* (p.23)

In addition to adding obscurantism to the main theories of socialism, Hegel was in any case a total reactionary apologist for the Prussian state! And Marx took this reactionary's theories seriously!

A much better account of Hegel's inspiration and politics has been provided by Alasdair MacIntyre:

*"The inheritors of the Enlightenment were in their different ways Hegel and Marx. In their writings there is a ferment of concepts whose life derives from their close interrelationship, the concepts of reason, of freedom, of human nature and history. 'When individuals and nations have once got in their heads the abstract concept of full-blown liberty, there is nothing like it in its uncontrollable strength, just because it is the very essence of mind...' So Hegel. His belief in the strength of the concept is not so surprising in one who wrote in the shadow of the American and French revolutions, above all in the shadow of the tree of Liberty planted in his student days at Tübingen. Unlike all his successors in disillusionment with revolutionary politics from Wordsworth to Malraux, Hegel never came to think his youthful belief in freedom mistaken. Even in his old age when he combined detestable political attitudes with bad logic to prove the Prussian monarchy the embodiment of freedom, he would on every anniversary of the taking of the Bastille drink toasts with his students in commemoration of that great liberation. What survived every twist and turn of Hegel's career was the conviction that freedom is the core of human nature."* [2].

For Kolko the Enlightenment itself is a problem, even before the obscurantism of Marx and Hegel. Why? Because of its unreasonable belief in the inevitability of human progress, and therefore the belief - transmitted to Marxism - that things would inevitably get better. In Kolko's account therefore, Marx and Marxism believed in the inevitability of progress - a simple teleology, or as Karl Popper famously put it, 'historicism', the notion that history has a pre-defined goal.

## History without surprises

So far, so familiar. Apart from the violence of the polemic, this doesn't get us past Popper. But, astonishingly for someone so familiar with the history of left movements, Kolko asserts that this led Marx and the Left to passivity and fatalism - sitting back and waiting for the inevitable dawn of

socialism - what he calls 'history without surprises'.

So for Kolko, Marxism is a determinist philosophy, and like all determinist philosophies has a mechanical view of history, a blind optimism and a view of the working class as passive. Actually this last point is modified a bit in what Kolko actually writes in detail; he really sees Marx as underestimating the unevenness and varied nature of working class consciousness, and therefore of having a fatalistic and mechanical view of the inevitability of the working class drawing revolutionary conclusions from crisis situations. It's not that Marxists see socialism inevitably coming out of 'history' from nowhere, it's that they see revolutionary consciousness inevitably coming out of crisis, and therefore socialism automatically coming out of crisis, via the inevitable development of working class consciousness (pp 27-8).

This, according to Kolko, leads Marxists to see the working class as an homogenised mass, and therefore to have a contemptuous and manipulative attitude towards it - ergo authoritarian leftism like 'Leninism' (a term he uses interchangeably with Communism) and Social Democracy.

Having established the theoretical roots of socialism's failure, Kolko then proceeds to chart the actual failures of socialists in the last century, and how all have failed in government.

On social democracy he is clear; it capitulated to the capitalist class. On the Communist parties he is less coherent. They became mass parties out of chaos and war, he claims, and their leaders had little knowledge of the real world and no idea about democracy. This is a very partial and one-sided critique of the roots of Stalinism. On both classical social democracy (ie pre-1939) and the Communist parties, Kolko insists they were blinded by mechanical theories, and above all by the short-sightedness, the dogma and the lack of knowledge of their leaders, who often found themselves as a result of the chaos and war of the 1930-50 period, in 'accidental mass parties'.

In passing, Kolko - like the little green man in *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe* who zaps around the universe with a clipboard in a frenzied attempt to insult all sentient beings - lambastes all the socialist leaders he can think of. Lenin was "at best a crank and at worst quite mad" and Rosa Luxemburg was "pathetically naïve". Gramsci attempted to add some voluntarism to the inevitable 'laws' of Marxism, and thus created an incoherent system and more confusion (pp66-67). Leon Trotsky does not appear in the book.

So here we have it. Marxism is inevitably flawed by its obscurantist origins in Hegel's teleological 'dialectical' schema, and inevitably generated parties which could not understand working class consciousness, and were authoritarian and dogmatic. It is a total failure. What have Marxists got to say about that?

### **Dialectics, science, teleology**

First on dialectics. Marx in volume 3 of *Capital*, claimed that he had adopted the 'rational kernel' of Hegel's dialectical method because it enabled him to see things in their interconnectedness and internal contradictions. In particular he insisted on the difference between the immediate appearance of phenomena and their real determinants, their 'laws of motion'. This was well explained by Georg Lukacs:

*"If the facts are to be understood, this distinction between their real essence and their inner core must be grasped clearly and precisely. This distinction is the first premise of a truly scientific study which in Marx's words, "would be superfluous if the outward appearance of things coincided with their essence". Thus we must detach the phenomena from the form in which they are immediately*

*given and discover the intervening links which connect them to their core, to their essence...It is necessary because of the historic character of the facts, because they have grown in the soil of capitalist society. This twofold character, the simultaneous recognition and transcendence of immediate appearances is precisely the dialectical nexus."* [3].

Kolko spends pages decrying Marx's political economy and its alleged obscurantism, but in fact this method allowed Marx to understand the Capital-Labour relationship and to scientifically situate exploitation via the category of surplus value. It is not only one of Marx's scientifically most important insights, but also of decisive political significance in giving a scientific political rationale to workers revolts. It is based on the core of the dialectical method.

It is of course highly ironic that Kolko should launch an attack on the dialectical-historical method of Marx, since he uses something very like it in his own work. What is Kolko's account of modern American imperialism if not a large body of work that seeks to discover is the inner dynamic, the 'laws of motion', of US capitalism, and not just the surface appearances in the newspapers or the speeches of bourgeois politicians? This is especially so since Kolko analyses foreign policy and war precisely in terms of the political-economic motivations of the contending parties.

And in any case what precisely is the 'reason' that is different from both Marxism and bourgeois apologetics? How can any social phenomenon be analysed with 'reason', without considering it in terms of historical development, its internal contradictions, its overall development over time?

What of the alleged teleology of Marxists? That they think socialism 'inevitable'? It's here we meet Kolko's missing category - Stalinism. In fact you can find plenty in the Stalinist manuals of the 1920s and 1930s about the inevitability of socialism, but you won't find it in any of the analytical or theoretical works of Lenin, Luxemburg or Trotsky. True, in Luxemburg's Reform or Revolution you can find references to inevitable economic collapse of capitalism, which Luxemburg saw as a key theoretical distinction between reformists and revolutionaries. But you will - famously - not find reference to the inevitability of socialism. Rather she saw the possibility of another alternative - barbarism. It all depended on the outcome of struggle, which of course includes a battle over the political choices of the working class (if you want their 'consciousness'). Recent articles in this magazine by Michael Löwy and Daniel Bensaid show how key founders of revolutionary Marxism had a very different vision of history compared to the mechanical teleology ascribed to them by Kolko. [4]

But Kolko has one more telling point as a sub-argument - but a decisive one - in his critique of 'Leninism'. He claims - as the author of the monumental Century of War - that Marxists have a simplistic account of working class consciousness and that it is war and uniquely the social collapse engendered by war that will make a working class revolutionary. In my view, as an overview of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this has a lot going for it, but is itself simplistic and one-sided. For example, the attempted fascist coup in July 1936, in Spain brought forth what was undoubtedly a revolutionary outburst in the Spanish and Catalan working class. This wasn't exactly war, but it did indeed lead to fighting and indeed eventually civil war. In the era of imperialism it is not surprising that conditions of social collapse and crisis are accompanied by wars of different types. Indeed Kolko's penultimate book is entitled, Another Century of War? It is clear that revolutionary, anti-capitalist consciousness is unlikely to take anything like a mass hold anywhere outside of conditions of harsh crisis and prolonged partial struggles, including partial defeats. It will not grow automatically, it will never arise as a result of "objective circumstances" or "events themselves", as Ted Grant used to say. But only as a result of political struggle, the interaction of agency, the subjective factor and the clash of political forces over time. There is nothing automatic or predestined about it.

## Left Outcomes

It seems to me highly likely that Kolko's reflection on the failures of the left were not just prompted by the collapse of Communism or working class defeats in general, but more likely also by what happened in Vietnam in particular. Perhaps the book that Kolko is best known for in a non-academic public is *Vietnam - Anatomy of War* (Unwin paperbacks 1986). In this book Kolko's identification with the Vietnamese Communist Party is pretty explicit. In fact its leaders become disembodied and semi-mystical in the form of 'the Revolution' - the Revolution decided this, prevented that and calculated the other. There isn't a word of criticism or reflection on the VCP in the book.

Ten years later, *Vietnam - Anatomy of Peace* is decrying the VCP's failures as 'astonishing' (Kolko's favourite adjective) and rooted in all-round theoretical and political failures. It's in this book that Kolko develops his critique of 'Leninism' as having totally failed to think through what might be a viable post-capitalist society. His picture of the VCP during the war has changed to seeing them as tactically clever and resourceful, but clueless in terms of overall social objectives.

What Kolko doesn't engage with is the fact that there has been an alternative Marxist tradition, indeed alternative Marxist traditions plural, which do not fit his picture of a bureaucratic left with mechanical, dogmatic theory. Such a recognition would not fit his outrageous and totally exaggerated notion that "Socialism has disappeared in all but name; parties that use that name are anything but radical". Frankly that claim is absurd and in contradiction to all known facts, from France to Bolivia.

Kolko's last chapter on the future merely says, well we have to start again, tough luck. We have to be careful about opportunist and authoritarian leaders, and we have to base our ideas on reason.

However, Kolko does defend the idea that an alternative future will have to go beyond capitalism and retain key objectives of socialism, like social ownership. That's exactly Gabriel Kolko's problem. If I call my cat 'Fido' and feed her dog food, that won't disrupt her fundamentally feline nature. And fighting for a collectivist, non-capitalist future, won't stop you striving for socialism, whatever you call it.

This book has some sensible concerns, but is spoilt by really exaggerated and unfounded accusations against Marxism and Marxists. If Kolko had been prepared to admit there were non-bureaucratic socialisms that have always fought Stalinism and social democracy, he might not have been led into such bad tempered incoherence.

\* Read Louis Proyect's critique of Kolko at Unrepentant Marxist: [Gabriel Kolko's "After Socialism"](#)

## NOTES

[1] Harper Row, New York, 1976

[2] *Breaking the Chains of Reason*, in the collection *Out of Apathy* pp 199-200, Stevens and Sons, London 1960

[3] *History and Class Consciousness*, p8. Merlin 1968, London

[4] See for example the article on the Marxism of Trotsky's Results and Prospects in the Theory section.

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