

The Unrepentant Marxist

Gabriel Kolko's "After Socialism"

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(Second in a series of posts on "Does Socialism Have a Future?")

Gabriel Kolko's "After Socialism" is a bitter diatribe against socialism drawn from ideas that were at one time much more fashionable among liberal intellectuals. In his acknowledgements, he singles out Bertrand Russell, Charles Peirce and Morris R. Cohen as writers who were "most congenial" when he began graduate work in the history of ideas and philosophy with an eye toward writing a Masters Thesis on progress. Cohen was at one time a major figure in American philosophy. From his roost at the City College of New York, he emphasized "the scientific method" and reason in a manner that while beyond reproach was unfortunately ignored by world history. Kolko, who first began kicking around the idea of an attack on socialism some 40 years ago, would pick up where Cohen left off and diagnose the problems of the socialist left as being rooted in a failure to be sufficiently reasonable.

Philosophy, however, is not the discipline that Kolko is most noted for. His reputation rests on a scholarly critique of American foreign policy associated with the "revisionist" trend that includes William Appleman Williams, Gar Alperovitz, Walter LeFeber, Howard Zinn and others. After reading his meretricious and cantankerous screed against socialism, one wishes that Kolko had stuck to what he knows best.

Like many critics of socialism in the academy, Kolko blames its failure on bad ideas. Oddly enough, his critique overlaps the one mounted by postmodernists in the 1970s and 80s who saw Marxism as sharing a susceptibility to imposing "grand narratives" on history. Going one step further, Kolko diagnoses the problem in terms of trying to theorize about society. Apparently, the 19th century was a time when all sorts of intellectuals tried to superimpose some kind of unified teleology on history under the influence of Hegel and other ambitious philosophers intoxicated by theory. The result of this bad thinking was bad social engineering once its proponents achieved any kind of political power. Kolko writes:

"The nineteenth century produced many thinkers who believed in the idea of inevitable social progress and perfectibility, and their ideas have been the dominant influence on most social thought since then. Social theorists imagined few, if any, limits on reformers' aspirations and pretensions or their ability to recast human institutions to fulfill their desires. Whatever their disagreements, both conservative and radical social concepts were consummately ambitious and shared grandiose, universalistic objectives. As each school articulated its notions of the foundations of the historical and social experiences, they created ideologies that ignored many dimensions of history. Both in substance and method, the dominant assumptions and pretensions of social ideas were, to varying degrees, both comprehensive and optimistic. They always emphasized their understanding rather than their ignorance, and their unifying premise was that increasing insight, even certainty for many schools of thought, lay within human grasp."

The idea of human overreach has a very ancient history. In a Greek myth, Dedalus presents his son Icarus with a set of wings but warns him not to fly too high. When Icarus foolishly decides to ignore him, the sun melts the wax that holds the feathers together and he falls to his death. In another cautionary tale involving hubris, Prometheus is punished for stealing the secret of fire from the gods and donating it to the human race. To punish him, the gods decree that his liver would be devoured by harpies over and over for no less than 30,000 years. Considering the enormous pain visited on countries that attempt experiments in socialism, ranging from the USSR to Allende's Chile (it should be mentioned that Kolko hates revolution and electoral politics alike when it comes to achieving socialist goals), one can certainly understand the relevance of Greek mythology, part and parcel of a society that valued strict regimentation, up to and including slavery.

Marx had an entirely different attitude toward Prometheus. His doctoral dissertation in philosophy, devoted to a comparison of Democritus and Epicurus, saw Prometheus's challenge to the gods as exemplary, particularly insofar as it elevated "human self-consciousness as the highest divinity," a phrase that no doubt would make Kolko tear his hair out. In the preface to his dissertation, Marx quotes Aeschylus's "Prometheus Bound":

Be sure of this, I would not change my state

Of evil fortune for your servitude.

Better to be the servant of this rock

Than to be faithful boy to Father Zeus.

For Kolko, the search for immutable laws of history that might yield a path to social progress was as foolhardy as Icarus's flight toward the sun or Prometheus's theft of fire. "System-building" of Marxian, Comtean or Spencerian varieties would only lead its proponents to crash to the ground, dragging innocent people down with them.

Marxism was far more dangerous than its rivals since it had the uncanny ability to attract working people who were clearly open to any kind of theory that entailed the liquidation of the class that exploited it mercilessly. One can hardly blame them. In a chapter titled "The legacies of socialism: theory", Kolko demonstrates a woeful unfamiliarity with Marx's methodology (a term that far better describes his achievements than "theory"). Supposedly Marx was fixated on economic crisis, when war has had a far more galvanizing effect on the working class:

"It is a fact that the working class finally became radicalized and a force for fundamental change, but almost wholly in connection with wars, when its leaders could no longer deceive many of them. While workers should, and indeed do, have a proclivity for certain assumptions and modes of action, Marx turned highly contingent possibilities into inevitable necessities and sacrificed the nuances which would have made his system of thought more relevant and durable. What workers have in fact done in the historical process, and their crucial significance as historical actors, played no part in Marx's theory - he was purely wrong. But the readiness of the working class to act under certain circumstances is a fact, one difficult to predict in advance but nonetheless of decisive importance. The working class's role in history is scarcely irrelevant because Marx got it all wrong, but there is no innate proletarian impulse to revolt at the time and place of a radicalized bourgeoisie's - which includes Marx and most theorists who lionized him - choosing. Its potential is often aborted and distorted, but that it will act - given the appropriate circumstances - is a reality of which we cannot make too much, or too little. Why it behaves as it does, with social stasis being the outcome most of the time, and the parameters of its possible behavior, is a crucial and complex question that Marx simplified inordinately."

This passage is filled with so much nonsense that one hardly knows where to begin. To start with, it is simply beyond comprehension that Kolko would draw a distinction between economic crisis and war, as if WWI and WWII were not driven by fundamental contradictions in the capitalist economy. Indeed, it is axiomatic to Marxism that war is the system's way of resolving crisis. As Rosa Luxemburg put it in "The Junius Pamphlet":

"The growth of capitalism, spreading out rapidly over a reconstituted Europe after the war period of the sixties and seventies, particularly after the long period of depression that followed the inflation and the panic of the year 1873, reaching an unnatural zenith in the prosperity of the nineties opened up a new period of storm and danger among the nations of Europe. They were competing in their expansion toward the non-capitalist countries and zones of the world."

In keeping with the intemperate tone that pervades "After Socialism," Kolko describes Luxemburg as a "hitherto obscure Polish Jew" who achieved some fame attacking Eduard Bernstein on the instigation of

"an ambitious, doctrinaire local party newspaper editor and millionaire adventurer, Alexander Israel Helphand (whose pseudonym was 'Parvus' and in 1917 worked with the German government to spirit Lenin from Switzerland to Russia), and then August Bebel, the SPD's Marxist leader. Consummately ambitious herself, she played with radical abstractions—a type of intellectual who has been the bane of the socialist movement since its inception."

If Kolko were not Jewish himself, one might say that this smacks of anti-Semitism. Who knows, maybe Kolko was influenced by Borat.

This portrait of Rosa Luxemburg is so grotesque that one wonders if it was drawn from the palette of anti-Communist literature. It is of course just as mean-spirited as Kolko's portrayal of socialist professors, who allegedly seek to maintain power on campus in the way that Stalin sought to maintain power in the USSR. As he puts it, "whenever ideas involve bureaucracies, tenure and jobs, the consequences will always be threatening to truly creative freedom of thought"—no doubt as exemplified by his own reinterpretations of Morris R. Cohen.

In chapter four, Kolko addresses "the role and limits of social theories". It basically warns against what postmodernists call "meta-narratives":

"No grand theory of any sort, religious or secular, has survived the ravages of human experience in an immensely complicated world which has undermined all highly structured propositions regarding the future of societies. Logical analyses of them have been even more devastating. Theories, and the assumptions they embody, rarely accord with social realities and they become in most instances articles of faith in which experience ceases to be a criterion for judging their relevance and truth. But we live in a profoundly troubled era which requires a great deal of intellectual innovation and originality appropriate for our contemporary social and human crises, and this demands that we discard most, perhaps all of the existing paradigms and conventions which are so fixed in the ideas of all ideological persuasions."

In reflecting a bit more deeply on this assertion, one might see similarities not just with postmodernism but with earlier attempts to discredit grand theories. When I was an undergraduate at Bard College in 1961, Heinrich Blucher would lecture us about the dangers of 19th century theorizing. Blucher was married to Hannah Arendt who incorporated such ideas in her "Origins of Totalitarianism." They could also be found in Camus's writings, especially "The Myth of Sisyphus". All that was evil in the current century can be blamed on 19th century system-building. From Hegel you get Marx and from Marx it is just one small step to Stalin's concentration camps. What I got out

of these brainwashing sessions was a need to stay away from grand theories, and especially the Commies who espoused them—even though none could be found at Bard College back then, despite Walter Winchell's characterization of the school as the "little red whorehouse on the Hudson."

In the 1950s, this was drummed to your head wherever you went to school. If it wasn't the trendy pop existentialism of a Camus or Hannah Arendt's warnings against utopian schemas, it was Daniel Bell in "The End of Ideology":

"But the seed of the corruption was the hubris of the "possessed." Generous of impulse, it sought the end of injustice, but in the single vision the dogmatism grew hard and the moral sense cynical, so that, when reality proved the vision false, all that was left was the hardness, or the despair."

The lesson to be drawn is this. Overly ambitious schemas to restructure society based on a grand theory will only backfire. The only recourse to people of good will who hate injustice and seek a better world is to remain free of political groups that have such overweening ambitions. In other words, you have to oppose capitalism—a system that Kolko clearly rejects—but you cannot posit a *systemic* overhaul. Despite the fact that capitalism itself involves an all-encompassing set of assumptions about the way that society operates and what kind of historical goals must be pursued, people on the left are doomed to failure if they also begin to think in such terms.

Kolko in effect recommends a political approach that puts conditions on itself in the face of a task that demands exactly what he forbids. He is for revolutionizing society, but is opposed to the creation of a *revolutionary theory*. He puts it this way:

"What is crucial is the sufficient transformation of those essentially capitalist institutions and precedents -those material or ideological forces that led to atavism, conflict, and war -that traditional socialists failed to alter when in a position to affect history. The term "socialism" itself is scarcely sacrosanct and warrants being replaced wherever a better definition is articulated."

However, there is absolutely nothing in "After Socialism" that points in the way toward such a "transformation". For a work that is driven by a kind of hatred toward capitalism and every serious attempt in the past 150 years or so to redress the ills it creates, there is not the slightest hint as to what should be done. If one is not allowed to construct socialist parties, then what kind of party does Kolko advocate?

In the final analysis, one gets the sense that Kolko is not only opposed to people coming together under the banner of sweeping theories such as socialism, but getting together at all. Except for a one sentence reference to the Green Parties that emerged to "expand the scope of a political dialogue in a very partial but nonetheless positive manner," there is no indication that Kolko has any use for radical politics in any form, socialist or otherwise. The 1960s were a disaster in his eyes:

"On the whole, when one adds together the secular adventurist revolutionary notions, the Christian-pacifist cult of innocence, uncritical Third World-ism - the belief that most movements in the developing nations are somehow automatically radical - and synthetic, eclectic varieties of wish-fulfillment that thrived from about 1960 to 1975, little of permanent value emerged from the so-called New Left experience."

Although I will have more to say on this topic in later posts, my outlook is exactly the opposite of Kolko's. Rather than trying to discredit socialism (or the New Left for that matter) as bad seeds planted in the 19th century that have sprouted monstrously misshapen growths in the 20th and 21st centuries, I believe that this history is our history and must be absorbed for its positive lessons as well as pruned of weeds. This legacy is not so much the creation of intellectuals as Kolko puts it, but

much more the collective memory of the working class in struggle. Without working class resistance, it is doubtful that Karl Marx or Frederic Engels would have ever developed their “grand theories”. It is exactly this working class memory that Kolko would extirpate in the name of the “scientific method” and reason.

P.S.

* From:

<http://louisproyect.wordpress.com/2006/12/25/gabriel-kolkos-after-socialism/>