



The End of Western Marxism? On the Unravelling of an Ideological Structure

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Received: 12 January 2023 / Accepted: 16 February 2023 / Published online: 11 March 2023
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Abstract

This study examines the proposition that the ideological structure of “Western Marxism” began to unravel after 1989 and the end of the Cold War, and that it is now largely falling apart. The argument proceeds in three steps, the first of which is an overview of Western Marxism’s ideological structure. The second step analyses a number of deeply critical assessments of Western Marxism from within the contexts of the few countries of the world that make up the “West.” The fact that these critical and often polemical studies are appearing indicates the breakdown of Western Marxism’s former hegemony. The third step deals with more constructive material, including the Western “recovery” of Engels, and especially the dialectics of nature, as well as the impact of the major achievements in the theory and practice of Marxism from developing countries, in the context of socialism in power.

Keywords Western Marxism · Ideological structure · Cold War context · Criticism · Recovering the full Marxist tradition

1 Opening Remarks

This study examines the proposition that since the end of the Cold War in 1989, the ideological structure of “Western Marxism” has been unravelling and has by now almost completely fallen apart. The terms used here need some definitions. To begin with, the Cold War was a stage in the global struggle between the socialist and capitalist camps. Although there were precursors and after-effects of the Cold War, we may set the dates from 1946 to 1989, from Winston Churchill’s infamous and racist “Iron Curtain” speech in March of 1946, which launched the Cold War, to the symbolic “fall of the Berlin Wall” in 1989. Further, by “Western Marxism” I mean not simply Marxism that is geographically located in the few Western countries of

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the world, but a whole ideological structure that was in many respects idiosyncratic (Kadri 2016, 107). The fact that not a few Marxist scholars have lived in Western countries but do not subscribe to the ideology of “Western Marxism” indicates that the ideological structure is the primary determining feature. Finally, by “unraveling” and “falling apart” I refer to the relative internal coherence and ideological hegemony that was exercised by Western Marxism, especially in the 1960s, 1970s, and part of the 1980s. This coherence and hegemony would seem to have fallen apart, as witnessed both by the increasing number of critical and indeed polemical assessments of the Western Marxist ideology, and by the increasing attention by scholars and younger people in Western countries to the many developments and achievements in Marxism from many other parts of the world, where the vast majority of humanity lives.

The argument that follows has three parts. The first provides a brief overview of the ideological structure of Western Marxism, drawing on an earlier study (Boer 2023). The second part discusses a number of critical assessments of Western Marxism, bringing to the surface the reality that this Marxist or “Left anti-communism” took sides in the Cold War against the “socialist camp.” The third concerns constructive re-engagements with the work of Engels, especially the dialectics of nature (which was dismissed by Western Marxism), as well as serious attention to the major chapters of the Marxist tradition that have been written in developing countries. To be clear, the following concerns debate within the few countries of the world that make up the “West.”

2 The Ideological Structure of Western Marxism

As mentioned above, “Western Marxism” designates less a geographical location of its proponents and primarily an ideological structure with a number of components.¹ To my knowledge, the first usage of “Western Marxism” as a term for a distinct philosophical position appears in a study from 1955 by Maurice Merleau-Ponty ([1955] 1973).² Notably, this usage appeared after the Cold War had been underway for a decade. However, Merleau-Ponty deployed the terminology of “Western Marxism” in a quite misleading manner, since the chapter with this title is a detailed treatment of Georg Lukács’s 1919 essay, “What Is Orthodox Marxism”—later included in *History and Class Consciousness* (Lukács 1988, 1–26; 1992, 47–75).³ Others too would come to claim Lukács as a forerunner or indeed originator of Western Marxism (Anderson 1976, 29), based almost entirely on a footnote in the essay

¹ The following section summarizes the argument of an earlier article (Boer 2023).

² We do find the term “Western Marxism” used by Karl Korsch in an essay from 1930, but his usage is strictly geographical: Marxism in Western Europe in relation to “Russian Marxism” (Korsch [1930] 2008). With the geographical location came political differences, especially in light of the criticisms of the Bolsheviks by Karl Kautsky and Rosa Luxemburg, among others, and the sharp reposte already by Lenin ([1918] 1965).

³ Since the readership of this article may include Chinese scholars, the citations include English and Chinese versions of the text where needed.

on orthodox Marxism in which Lukács suggested that Engels “extended” Marx’s method and applied it to a dialectics of nature. Instead, avers Lukács in this early and quite immature piece, Marxism is supposedly concerned with “social processes.” However, after his move to the Soviet Union in 1930 and his immersion in the manuscripts at the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, Lukács’s writing began to show a comprehensive awareness of what the Marxist method actually entails. His best works come from this period and continued after his return to Hungary at the end of the Second World War. So we need to ask what Lukács himself thought of this 1919 essay and indeed the whole work, *History and Class Consciousness*: “The fundamental ontological error,” he says in an interview close to the end of his life, is that in the early work he recognized only “existence in society as true existence.” Further, he observes that his immature repudiation of the dialectics of nature meant a “complete absence” of Marxism’s “universality” (Lukács 1983, 77). In other words, a comprehensive Marxist method very much includes the materialist dialectical analysis of nature *and* society, and thus the contributions of both Marx and Engels. Clearly, Lukács should not be included under the umbrella of Western Marxism and is thus not its originator. The false claim that Lukács was such an originator may be seen as an effort to give “Western Marxism” a longer pedigree.

2.1 The Three Reductions

Unlike Lukács, a hallmark of Western Marxism was the reduction of “Marxism” to the works of Marx alone and the rejection of Engels. This reduction appears in many a work by Western Marxists, but let us consider the brief biography of Engels by David McLellan (1977, 2017). In McLellan’s opinion, the educational background, temperaments, and understandings of communism indicate significant “divergences” between Marx and Engels, which “go back a long way.” Indeed, Engels supposedly produced after Marx’s death a philosophical or doctrinal system known as “scientific socialism” that was “entirely foreign to Marx’s work” (McLellan 1977, 103; 2017, 105).⁴ For McLellan, Engels becomes the ultimate “betrayal” of Marxism, bequeathing a “distorted” perception to subsequent generations. In Western cultural contexts, such “betrayal narratives” have deep religious and theological roots (think of Judas Iscariot betraying Jesus before the latter’s death).

It is a short step to the second reduction, in which Marxism becomes defined as “historical materialism,” without “dialectical materialism.” Although McLellan makes this point, let us turn to the succinct statement by Tom Bottomore. In his polemic against dialectical materialism, Bottomore suggests that Engels sought—in his *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature*—to “integrate certain conceptions of historical materialism into the philosophy of nature.” In Bottomore’s representative view, the move is *from* Marx’s “historical materialism” *to* the dialectics of nature and thus dialectical materialism. The purpose, suggests Bottomore, was to create a

⁴ As with so many assertions like this, it is incorrect. Marx also used the terminology of “scientific socialism” (Marx [1880] 1998, 542).

single “ontology” for both nature and human society, and it is this “ontology” that was subsequently turned into a “schlerotic ... Marxist metaphysics” (Bottomore 1983, 150; 1994, 149).

Thus far, we have two key reductions of Western Marxism: the reduction to Marx alone and to “historical materialism” as the definition of Marxism. In other words, Marxism is supposedly concerned only with the analysis of human society, economics, and history. The third reduction was to a very Western type of science and philosophy, separating Marxism as a method for analysing capitalism from Marxism as a political praxis. In this case, we consider the suggestion by Louis Althusser—arguably the most influential Western Marxist in continental Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. In proposing a number of theses that sought to highlight Marx’s distinct contribution, Althusser observes that he will “only discuss Marxist theory” (Althusser 1972, 165; 1990, 109). To be put aside is the workers’ movement, as well as the socialist revolutions in the “USSR, China, etc.,” as well as the “revolutionary movements in Asia, Vietnam, Latin America, Communist Parties, etc.” (Althusser 1972, 165; 1990, 109). Freed from such constraints, Althusser specifies Marx’s discovery as the “science of history” and a new “philosophy” that follows. However, it is the historical context of this discovery that is most revealing. Marx’s discovery of the science of history is the third of a series with an exclusively European heritage:

1. The discovery of mathematics in ancient Greece → creation of philosophy by Plato.
2. The discovery of physics by Galileo → transformation of philosophy by Descartes.
3. Discovery of history by Marx → revolution in philosophy, announced by Marx but still developing.

As Domenico Losurdo (2008b, 43) observes, Althusser develops an “idealistic distortion of historical materialism,” in the sense that “Marxism” is the result of “the genius of a single individual,” who is the product of an intellectual history “that takes place exclusively in the West.”

2.2 The Five Determinations

The ideological structure of Western Marxism was also determined by its context in the few Western countries of the world. I use the term “context” in a comprehensive sense—including political, economic, cultural, and social factors. Western Marxism was determined by this context in at least five ways. For the first determination, we begin with Perry Anderson’s observation that the “hidden hallmark” of Western Marxism is that it was a “product of defeat,” so much so that the works of Western Marxists were “produced in situations of political isolation and despair” (Anderson 1976, 42; 2001, 58). Anderson’s point is merely a beginning. True, he observes that Western Marxism arose as a result of the repeated defeats of revolutionary movements in Western countries, but the most determining feature is as follows: politically, Western Marxism entrenched itself in the period before a successful proletarian revolution, or what may be called “before October.” This is a qualitative point:

the perspective “before October,” when power—economic, political, social, and cultural—is still a future prospect, is qualitatively distinct from the period “after October,” when a Communist Party has gained power through a proletarian revolution, and is on the long and arduous path of socialist construction. Western Marxism’s whole approach was framed and determined by the perspective of “before October.”

The second determination may be described as the “freelance intellectual.” To stay with Perry Anderson’s unwittingly autobiographical account, Western Marxists faced a choice in relation the Communist Parties of their respective countries. For these theorists, “the official Communist movement represented the central or sole pole of relationship to organized socialist politics.” Two options were possible: “Either the theorist could enrol in a Communist Party and accept the rigour of its discipline,” or the theorist could “remain outside any party organization whatever, as an intellectual freelance” (Anderson 1976, 43–44; 2001, 59–60). The fact that the vast majority of Western Marxists became or were “freelance intellectuals” indicates an extraordinary break between the theory and practice of Marxism (see also in relation to Althusser above). The autobiographical point here is that Anderson too was such a “freelance intellectual,” without “anchorage” in the working class movement.⁵

A third determination concerns the pervasiveness of Western liberalism. As Wallerstein observes (2011, 2013), “centrist liberalism” came to shape the whole political framework in Western countries. Using the French Revolution of 1789 as touchstone, Wallerstein points out that conservatives initially saw the revolution as a profound disruption of the slow and “natural” pace of social development. As Western liberalism took hold, conservatives were forced into the position of slowing change down to a pace that drew closer to their own preferences. By contrast, socialists came to feel that the pace of change was far too slow, even in the hands of the liberals. Initially, this desire may have been expressed as “revolution,” but even this term came to be seen in a Western liberal context as the need to hasten the pace of reform through a big “helping hand.” The pressure of liberalism on socialists was immense, and we find the repeated disavowals of “revolution” and “dictatorship of the proletariat” from the time of Engels’s struggles with such tendencies in the large German Social-Democratic Party (Boer 2021, 30–40), through the “Eurocommunism” of the 1970s and 1980s, to the requirement for Socialist and Communist Parties to remove the “revolution” clause from their party platforms before being permitted to participate in the emerging European Union and its “parliament.”

Further, the “freedom” espoused by Western liberalism has always been very limited. As Losurdo points out, this liberalism is predicated on the unfreedom of slavery. The three founding countries—The Netherlands, England, and the USA—of what became liberalism were deeply involved in the slave trade, so we find that slavery became the necessary contrast for a strong perception of “freedom.” In other

⁵ Anderson also misrepresents the “rigour” of the Communist Party’s “discipline.” In doing so, he invokes the standard “bogeyman” of Western Marxism, Stalin, and writes of the “Stalinisation” of Communist Parties and the “stifling” of intellectual endeavour. Anderson’s Trotskyite predilections—so common among Western Marxists—come to the fore here.

words, only when face to face with “unfreedom” can “freedom” be clarified. This “freedom” lies at the heart of liberalism, which is defined as a small “community of the free and its dictatorship over peoples unworthy of liberty” (Losurdo 2011, 248; 2014, 271). The boundary between free and unfree may shift from time to time, but the unfree remain the vast majority. Today, the “free” belong to the few Western countries of the world, with only 14 per cent of the world’s population; the rest are not included. It should be no surprise that Western liberalism has long been the ideology of Western imperialism in the sense that the rest of the world has been viewed through the lens of the small “community of the free.”

This brings us to the fourth determination of Western Marxism: Western imperialism. Its presence comes to the surface whenever one encounters a peremptory dismissal of socialism in developing countries, but a clear expression appears in Terry Eagleton’s popular booklet *Why Marx Was Right*. Opining that socialism cannot be achieved in “impoverished conditions,” which “would require almost as bizarre a loop in time as inventing the Internet in the Middle Ages” (Eagleton 2011a, 20; 2011b 16), Eagleton then defines socialism in terms of redistribution. “You cannot reorganise wealth,” he writes, “for the benefit of all if there is precious little wealth to reorganise.” Why? “Conflicts over a material surplus too meagre to meet everyone’s needs” will lead to a failed socialist project (Eagleton 2011a, 20; 2011b 16). So where can socialism be achieved? The answer should not surprise us: as a prerequisite, socialism needs a “skilled, educated, politically sophisticated populace,” along with “thriving civic institutions,” a high level of technology, and—note carefully—“enlightened liberal traditions and the habit of democracy” (Eagleton 2011a, 22; 2011b, 18). Such countries happen to belong to the small number of countries that make up the “West,” with their sordid and sanguinary histories of imperialism, colonization, genocide, and crimes against humanity. The imperialism at the heart of liberalism should be obvious. Eagleton is not yet done, closing these opinions with a racist flourish: countries with a history of colonial rule cannot, opines Eagleton, construct socialism, since they “cannot even afford to mend the dismally few highways” they have, and “have no insurance policy against sickness or starvation beyond a pig in the back shed” (Eagleton 2011a, 22; 2011b, 18).

The fifth determination is religiously inspired utopianism. Two points need to be emphasized, one philosophical and the other historical. Philosophically, the common ground of Western theology and utopian thought is ontological transcendence, which frames in so many ways the Western cultural and social traditions. As Ames (2011, 212) puts it, “strict philosophical or theological transcendence is to assert that an independent and superordinate principle A originates, determines, and sustains B, where the reverse is not the case.” For so many Western Marxists, socialism becomes a well-nigh transcendent principle, which has at least thus far been unknowable, unattainable, and yet to be achieved. With such an assumption, from Walter Benjamin to Terry Eagleton, any actual effort to construct socialism can be summarily dismissed. Concerning the historical point, at the turn of the twenty-first century a number of Western Marxists turned to Christian theology (for example,

Badiou 2003, 2015; Žižek 2000, 2004; Eagleton 2014, 2016).⁶ Much could be said about this “turn,” such as its deeply defeatist and conservative nature, but let me emphasize that it was very much a sign of crisis, and thus of the unravelling of Western Marxism after the end of the Cold War. With the Soviet Union and eastern European socialist states consigned to history, they abandoned the ideas of class struggle and the workers’ movement, and so much of Marxist theory. Instead, they sought earlier Western models of “revolution,” which they thought they had found in the Christian tradition’s “conversion” and the “irruption” of a transcendent placeholder for the divine into this world. Looking back on this material now, it is clear that there was little in the way of a revival of the revolutionary tradition about it; instead, it was a deep symptom of the demise of Western Marxism, in the sense that its constant temptation to a religiously inspired and transcendent utopianism came into the open.

2.3 The Three Suspicions

The final components of the Western Marxist ideology concern three suspicions—of the state and national liberation, of science and technology, and of productive forces. In terms of the first suspicion,⁷ we find a distorting influence of anarchism’s emphasis—from the time of Bakunin onwards—on the state as the root of all exploitation and the need to “abolish” the state. For example, in Antonio Negri’s *Empire* (co-written with Michael Hardt), we come across the curious suggestion that the new acephalous global capitalist “empire” no longer needs a state to be its anchor. Even more, anti-colonial struggles for national liberation in so many parts of the world have produced a state that Negri sees as a “perverse trick.” How so? New types of internal domination emerge, and the newly liberated state is absorbed externally in a supposedly uniform global capitalism. As a result, from “India to Algeria and Cuba to Vietnam, *the state is the poisoned gift of national liberation.*” (Negri and Hardt 2000, 136; 2003, 133–34). This summary dismissal of long and arduous anti-colonial struggles for national liberation is comparable to that of Eagleton.

For the second suspicion, we may consider the suggestions by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. While the latter spoke of what he saw as the “socially conditioned tendency toward ... the instrumentalization of thought” (Horkheimer 1996, 2), in their dialogues published as *Dialectic of Enlightenment* they speak of the “oblivious instrumentalization of science.” Such a science has been reduced to a “mere means in the existence of an existing order,” a servant of the processes of industrial society, in which everything—including human beings and animals—has become a part of a “repeatable, replaceable process” (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, xv, 65; 2020, 1–2, 73). In other words, science has become “technology,” which they see in a purely negative light. While knowledge as power knows no

⁶ The engagement with Western religion has a much longer history (Boer 2014), but my interest here is with the more recent Western Marxist “turn” to religion.

⁷ It is not uncommon to find the suspicion of the state and national liberation expressed as a wariness of “nationalism,” which is seen to be opposed to Marxism’s assumed emphasis on class struggle.

limits, “either in its enslavement of creation or in its deference to worldly masters,” and serves the purposes of the bourgeois economy “both in factories and on the battlefield,” the ultimate expression of knowledge is technology: “Technology is the essence of this knowledge,” since it aims to “produce neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of the labour of others, capital” (Horkheimer and Adorno (1947) 2002, 2; 2020, 2). They opine that “progress is reverting to regression,” and the “gifts of fortune themselves become elements of misfortune” (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002, xviii; 2020, 4).

The final suspicion concerns productive forces, concerning which we may consider the Belgian Trotskyite, Ernest Mandel. In a piece that seeks to provide a succinct definition of socialism, Mandel reveals some common assumptions among Western Marxists: socialism is “characterized by collective ownership of the means of production” and the “radical redistribution” of the fruits of capitalist productive forces (Mandel 1985, 146, 151). In other words, the working class simply needs to seize the means of production and then redistribute the proceeds. One wonders what a socialist society might do after such redistribution, but Mandel provides no answer. This definition was as common among Western Marxists as it was mistaken, for the following reasons. First, Marx and Engels emphasized already in “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” the need to “centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organized as the ruling class” and to “increase the total of productive forces as rapidly as possible” (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 504; [1848] 2009, 52). Both ownership and the liberation of productive forces—the latter key element is entirely missing from Mandel’s definition. Second, his approach is implicitly imperialist, since all that developing countries need to do is rely on the charity of socialists in countries with “advanced” productive forces. Lest these wealthy socialists become worried, Mandel (1985, 152) reassures them that they would not experience a “fall in the standard of living.” As we will see, in all socialist countries they took to heart the point from Marx and Engels and sought resolutely to liberate and develop the productive forces in their own countries, for only in this way would they be able to alleviate the problem of chronic poverty.

As the final sentences above begin to indicate, these three areas of suspicion among Western Marxists relate directly to the needs of developing countries, especially those who have achieved independence after anti-colonial struggle and have chosen the socialist road. Once liberated from the colonial yoke, the state and governance have proved to be absolute necessities for implementing development plans and ensuring sovereignty from interference by former colonial powers; science and technology have been identified as significant productive forces for the sake of economic development; and finding the best way to liberate productive forces has been a focus of all countries setting out on the socialist road. I have drawn these insights from the work of Domenico Losurdo, to whom I will turn a little later. But by way of summarizing the ideological structure of Western Marxism—which I have outlined by taking a series of representative statements of common positions—we may see Western Marxism as a resolute rejection of all countries that have had and have today a Communist Party in power, and are on socialist road as it is shaped by their own concrete conditions. In this respect, Western Marxism clearly took sides in the Cold War.

3 Criticism and Polemic: Distortions, Compartmentalism, and Cold-War Complicity

The ideological system outlined in the previous section more or less held sway in some contexts during the 1960s and 1970s, and even into the 1980s. However, it would take a couple of decades for the criticisms—often harsh—to appear. These criticisms are the topic of this section, and I will leave the question for now as to how we may understand the suspended period of a decade or more—the 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s—when it seemed as though Western Marxism may have been enjoying the infamous “end of history” proclaimed by some pundits in the few Western countries of the world. The reason for dealing with these criticisms should be clear, since they indicate that even within a Western context, the sway of Western Marxism was waning.

3.1 Distortions of Marxist Methodology

To begin with, let us consider a study by Boer and Yan (2021), in which they tackle a number of Western Marxist misrepresentations of socialism with Chinese characteristics. These misrepresentations have been variously called “capitalist socialism,” “bureaucratic capitalism,” capitalism or “neoliberalism ‘with Chinese characteristics,’” and “state capitalism.” These lazy and superficial assumptions have had some traction among residual Western Marxists since the beginning of the reform and opening-up, and especially since the tumultuous events in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe in 1989–1991. However, the study focuses on the methodological (and empirical) problems of these hypotheses, indicating the impasses of a Western Marxist ideological structure. Most notably, they distort Marxist methodology so as to make it almost unrecognizable. First, in a complete inversion of the base-superstructure approach, they assume that the state or governance is the determining feature of the economic system. This curious move reveals the influence of Western assumptions that the political system is the key. Second, this inversion leads to a voluntarist approach entirely at odds with Marxist methodology: the supposed “capitalist turn” in the late 1970s—which is empirically unfounded—is opined to have been made due to some inexplicable and unverified political decision. Third, these studies are vitiated by the assumption that a “market economy,” wherever it has appeared in human history or appears today is by definition a “capitalist market economy” (see further Boer 2017). Finally, the Western Marxists who have made such suggestions evince a barely concealed Orientalism, in which they assume—according to the racist trope—that Asian peoples are always hiding something, and that Western pundits “know better.”

3.2 From Compartmentalism to Complicity with Capitalist Imperialism

The second critical and indeed polemical assessment of Western Marxism comes from the political economist Ali Kadri. As indicated above, Kadri (2016, 107)

defines “Western” Marxism in terms of an ideological structure and not in a geographical sense. For Kadri, a main fault of Western Marxist economic analysis is its compartmentalism. Focused on the patterns of capitalist exploitation in Western countries, they miss completely the actual source of value in the production of waste—through wars and the wastage of human lives—undertaken by capitalist powers in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, and elsewhere. For much of Eurocentric Western Marxism, “value becomes gauged by the hours of labour in an English factory, and not in the labour of death experienced in the trenches of the wars visited upon the Third World” (Kadri 2021, ix, 56; see also 2019, 67). As a result, the contribution of five centuries of imperialist war and colonially inflicted deaths in producing capitalist value is “reduced to almost nothing” (Kadri 2021, 154). This compartmentalism—a characteristic feature of academic work in liberal contexts—is also apparent in the criticisms of socialist countries such as China, where the highlighting of isolated problems and contradictions wilfully fails to see that such problems are part of the socialist road and thereby refuses to consider all aspects of the whole (Kadri 2021, vii). The result is a pernicious siding with Western imperialism, which may be seen in two respects. First, the Western bourgeoisie has successfully co-opted Western Marxists in seeking to demolish the real alternative of socialism (Kadri 2021, 74, xv). Second, Western Marxists wilfully joined forces with Western liberals, crying the same slogans of “siding with the common people” and thus serving to “grease imperialist aggression” (Kadri 2019, 29; 2021, 74). The result: Western Marxism held to an “educated imperialist class position” and thus became complicit with “white supremacist ideology” (Kadri 2021, xv, 145). In terms of a Cold War context, Western Marxism “piped the same anti-Soviet cant as bourgeois democracy” (Kadri 2016, 39).

3.3 Complicity with the Capitalist Project

If Kadri’s work begins to highlight the Cold-War context and the complicity of Western Marxism with capitalist imperialism, this complicity very much comes to the fore in two recent studies by Rockhill (2021, 2022). He writes of the Marxist or “Left anti-communism” of the Cold-War era Frankfurt School—the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt—and the subsequent developments of what became known as “Critical Theory.” While the two studies overlap somewhat, the emphasis of the first, “Critical and Revolutionary Theory” (2021) is to reassess the whole sub-tradition known as “Critical Theory.” In this piece, Rockhill argues that from its founding in 1923 until the end of that decade, the earliest research of the Frankfurt School may have been based on Marxism, but with the appointment of Max Horkheimer in 1930 the Institute rapidly distanced itself not merely from the workers’ movement, but also from any Marxism of substance.⁸ By the time we

⁸ The initial name of the journal, established under the leadership of Carl Grünberg, was *Archiv für die Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung* (Archive for the History of Socialism and the Workers’ Movement). When Max Horkheimer took over as leader of the Institute at the end of the 1920s, the title changed to the more innocuous *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal for Social Research).

come to the era in which Jürgen Habermas—in his earlier years a member of the “Hitler Youth”—set the agenda, the thoroughly pro-Western and liberal ideological framework was not so much a turning point as a culmination of a much longer trend. It should be no surprise that Habermas supported both the Persian Gulf War and NATO’s war crime in attacking Yugoslavia (Rockhill 2021, 129).⁹ In following the long devolution of “Critical Theory” until his own time, Rockhill concludes that one of its primary functions has been to “recuperate potential radicals within the ideological consensus that a world beyond capitalism and pseudo-democracy is not only impossible but undesirable” (Rockhill 2021, 117–18). The “conformist core” of “Critical Theory” assiduously promoted the deleterious slogan that “there is no alternative” to capitalism.

3.4 The Frankfurt School’s Cold-War Anti-Communism

In the earlier study, Rockhill holds on to the notion that the era of Adorno and Horkheimer, from the 1930s to the 1950s, may still have adhered at least to the critical “spirit” of Marxism, but by the later study of 2022, this notion disappears. Instead, it is the sheer complicity with Cold War anti-communist propaganda that comes to the fore.¹⁰ Let us go into a little detail. Horkheimer had barely taken over the directorship of the Institute when it was decided to move to New York. Apart from the enthusiastic banishing of any hint of Marxism, communism, or revolution from its publications, lectures, and seminars, and apart from strenuous efforts to align the Institute’s research agenda with US “standards,” the rapid process of absorption into the CIA-sponsored anti-communist networks is the most telling feature. We need to be wary here, since one may gain the impression that the CIA was like the divine: omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. While it was more often inept, bumbling, and given to internal warfare, it had more money that it could hope to spend in the “usual” manner. Front organizations, presses, journals, “learned” societies, and grant upon grant were available for those willing to sell their souls. Horkheimer and Adorno were, more than willing to do so. For example, Adorno received funding and support from the “Office of Radio Research” (later the “Bureau of Applied Social Research”), which was itself funded primarily by US state and military entities and was a key component of what is now known as “psychological warfare.” Resident in rather comfortable offices in Manhattan, Horkheimer hired the “Public Relations” firm, Phoenix News Publicity Bureau, to promote the Institute’s work in the USA (Rockhill 2021, 125–26; 2022). Institute members also found work in the US Office of War Information (Leo Löwenthal), the US Department of

⁹ As Stefano Azzarà has observed (personal communication), the path for so many supposedly “Left” thinkers in Europe has led to overt support for imperialist wars of aggression. Apart from Habermas, we may also think of Agnes Heller and Slavoj Žižek, although neither counts in the least as a Marxist. On the right-wing and racist proclivities of “capitalism’s court-jester” Žižek, see Rockhill (2023).

¹⁰ In the earlier work, Rockhill relies mainly on scholars such as Wiggershaus (1995), Wheatland (2009), and Jeffries (2017), but in the second study he draws deeply on that curious and uniquely US institution, the “CIA Electronic Reading Room.”

Justice (Friedrich Pollock), and the CIA predecessor, the Office of Strategic Services (Herbert Marcuse, Franz Neumann, and Otto Kirchheimer). And this is apart from cosy relationships with scholars and Cold-War warriors such as Sidney Hooke and Carl Wittfogel, both deeply connected, respectively, with the CIA and FBI (Rockhill 2021, 126, 136).

The US sojourn merely laid the foundation for what would unfold when the Institute returned to Frankfurt. Horkheimer may have returned as a US citizen with handsome Rockefeller¹¹ and US government grants in his bank account (Rockhill 2021, 128–29; 2022), as well as sidling up to the reactionary Christian Democratic Union and gaining funding from the Ford Foundation, but it was Adorno who became deeply enmeshed with the Cold War anti-communist intellectual networks (Rockhill 2022). He published in CIA-funded journals such as *Der Monat*, *Encounter*, and *Tempo presente*, and worked closely with Melvin Lasky, one of the most ardent anti-communist CIA operatives in West Germany. Lasky was not only the chief editor of *Der Monat*, but also on the steering committee for the CIA front organization, the “Congress for Cultural Freedom” (CCF). Even more, Adorno’s name appears in documents from the late 1950s and 1960s that indicate he was being actively considered for a German chapter of the CCF. It should be no surprise, then, that while West Germany was by far the most reactionary of states in Europe at the time, fostering any number of “ex-” Nazis and bound up with the US spying apparatus (Wiggershaus 1995), Adorno, Horkheimer, and later Habermas, would try to tell the student radicals of the 1960s that West Germany was one of the most “democratic” and “liberal” states in the world.

A question remains: was this complicity unwitting or wilful? Were Adorno, Horkheimer, and so many other Western Marxists “left idiots of the authoritarian state” (Rockhill 2021, 131; 2022),¹² as the radical German students called them in the later 1960s,¹³ or were they more deliberate about their complicity with the Cold War structures of the rogue state known as the USA? The answer is obviously not either-or, but both-and. The appeal of funding, publications, and influence would have been immensely tempting for even the most naive, but there is more than enough evidence to suggest that Adorno, Horkheimer, and the others knew what they were doing. To emphasize the point, we should also note the current of racism through their works. In a magazine item for *Der Spiegel*, they wrote of “Arab robber-states,” (Rockhill 2021, 129), and in a “manifesto” they asserted the superiority of the West and spoke of the Soviet Union and China as “barbaric,” as “beasts” and “hordes” that have chosen “slavery” in their path to “fascism” and threaten to “swallow up” Europe (Adorno and Horkheimer 2011; see Rockhill 2022).

¹¹ Rockhill (2022) describes the Rockefellers as “one of the greatest gangster families in the history of US capitalism.”

¹² They also described Adorno and the others as “*Scheißkritische Theoretiker* [shit-critical theorists]” (Rockhill 2022).

¹³ As Rockhill points out, Adorno calling the police on student activists and pressing charges against their leader was simply a continuation of a whole direction.

Rockhill's works have a sharp and delightfully polemical edge to them, in part because—as he openly admits—as a young and uninformed student he too had once been seduced by the apparent complexity of thought of the Frankfurt School and its later devolution into “Critical Theory.” These essays are merciless in showing the deep complicity of at least the Frankfurt School with the Cold War anti-communist apparatus, and the incorporation of the supposed “radicals” of “Critical Theory” within the capitalist project. I have also dwelt with this material for a while, since it reveals the concrete conditions for Western Marxism's resolute ideological dismissal of developing countries on the socialist road. This ideological structure did not exist simply in the heads of its thinkers, but was a very useful aspect of the West's propaganda effort against communism.

4 Rediscovering Mainstream Marxism

The previous section presented the works of a number of critics in order to examine how sharp the criticism has become and to indicate how threadbare and indeed pernicious was the ideological structure of Western Marxism. However, criticism and polemic comprise only one aspect, for we also find a realization not only that Western Marxism was severely wanting in its analytical power, due to significant excisions of the Marxist tradition, but also that the Marxism which has been developing through concrete practice in many other parts of the world—from the Soviet Union to China—is in fact the mainstream. In this section, I deal with the work of two influential scholars, John Bellamy Foster and the “recovery” of Engels, and Domenico Losurdo's sustained attention to mainstream Marxism in developing countries.

4.1 The “Return” of Engels

In a number of works over the last couple of decades, Foster (2000; 2020) has been re-investigating the extensive notebooks on the natural sciences published in the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, as well as Engels's significant research on the natural sciences for the sake of developing a solid foundation for an “ecological Marxism.” The approach to Engels appears most clearly in a succinct article entitled “The Return of Engels,” in which Foster begins with David McLellan's dismissal of Engels in the 1970s (see above), points out the acknowledgement of Engels's importance by natural scientists such as Gould (1977, 207–13; 1988, 111–12), and Levins and Lewontin (1985, 70, 253, 279–80), and then suggests that “Western Marxism” may be defined by the rejection of Engels's *Dialectics of Nature*. In light of my earlier discussion, this suggestion is perhaps too simplistic, but the point of Foster's essay is to suggest that Engels's argument is even more relevant today: “it is not a question of building the laws of dialectics into nature, but of discovering them in it and evolving them from it” (Engels [1894] 1988, 495). Or as Foster puts it, Engels's thesis, “Nature is the proof of dialectics,” which reflects his “deep dialectical and ecological analysis,” can be rendered in today's parlance as “Ecology is the proof of dialectics” (Foster 2017, 5).

At the same time, Foster's proposed "return" of Engels makes sense only in light of the strange history of Western Marxism, which sought to excommunicate Engels from the Marxist canon. From a wider and indeed mainstream Marxist perspective, this whole narrative of expulsion and return should never have happened. Indeed, for a mainstream approach, the theory of a "complete agreement" between Marx and Engels is careless, while the "complete opposition" theory is untenable (Zhao 2016). Instead, one may speak of "agreement based on differences," or "co-creation and complementarity [*tongchuang hubu*]" (Huang 2016, 2017).¹⁴ That said, the fact that Engels is proving to be a key for an influential body of research concerning a Marxist approach to ecological questions, and that this is taking place within a Western context, indicates that yet another dimension of the Western Marxist ideology has come apart.

4.2 "Eastern" Marxism as the Mainstream

The final body of work to be considered is that of Domenico Losurdo (died 2018), who is posthumously becoming increasingly influential. His many works have both militantly polemical and constructive aspects, and his studies of Western Marxism contain both. An initial essay on Western Marxism was published in 2008, and this was subsequently expanded into his last book (Losurdo 2008b, 2017).¹⁵ While Losurdo is merciless concerning the witting and unwitting distortions, ignorance, and imperialism of so much Western Marxism, I am interested here in the way he contrasts its shortcomings with insights from what he calls "Eastern" Marxism, but which we may see in terms of Marxism in developing countries.

Let us begin with what Losurdo calls the "colonial question," specifically the systemic avoidance and displacement by Western Marxists of colonization, enslavement, and genocide in the process of capitalist accumulation. Losurdo notes that, unlike Western Marxists, the colonial question was central for Mao Zedong, and the example given concerns the internal colonialism of the "white supremacist" racial state known as the USA (Mao [1963] 2009; [1963] 1998).¹⁶ He also quotes Ho Chi Minh, who speaks of what counts as "justice" in Indochina: it actually means there is "one law for the Annamese and another for the Europeans or those holding European citizenship." As for the Annamese, the only "law" is to be "oppressed and exploited shamelessly," "tortured and poisoned pitilessly," suffering "atrocities perpetrated by the predatory capitalists in Indochina" (Ho 1920, 16). The brutality

¹⁴ We may add here the approach suggested by Griese (1987; see also 1981; 1989), who emphasized the parallels and reciprocal working relationship between Marx and Engels in relation to the natural sciences. Griese led the MEGA teams editing both Engels's *Dialectics of Nature* (MEGA I.26, published in 1985), as well as Marx's notes on geology, mineralogy, and agricultural chemistry (MEGA IV.26, published in 2011).

¹⁵ Both the initial essay and the book will be published in English translation early in 2023. The first translation of the book into another language was into Chinese (Losurdo 2022).

¹⁶ For a recent analysis of the continued avoidance of the question of racism by US Marxists such as Fredric Jameson, and an argument that racism is crucial for a Marxist-Leninist approach to class struggle, see Wendland-Liu (2022).

of colonial oppression as an inescapable part of capitalism was, points out Losurdo, very much at the forefront of Marx's mind when writing *Capital* itself. As one example among many, Marx writes that with the "rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production," Africa was transformed into a "warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins" (Marx [1867] 1996, 739).

Closely related is the importance of national liberation, and by implication the crucial role of the state in formerly colonized countries that have been liberated (see further Tang and Wang 2020). Once again, Losurdo quotes Mao Zedong and Ho Chi Minh, and if we cast our eye over the four-volume *Selected Works* of the latter we will find that national liberation is an over-riding theme. As it is also, I would add, for Kim Il Sung during the Korean struggle to throw off the yoke of Japanese colonialism. Mentioning Lenin's ([1914] 1968, 99) appreciation of Hegel's point that the universal must comprise itself in "the wealth of the particular," Losurdo (2008b, 57) observes: "True to this approach, personalities such as Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, Mao, Castro, etc. never constructed a contradiction between patriotism and internationalism, but have always seen in the liberation struggle of oppressed nations an essential moment in the path of internationalism and universalism." Or, as Mao ([1963] 2009, 330; [1963] 1998, 379) put it, "National struggle, in the final analysis, is a question of class struggle." We should not forget that such developments, and especially the state form that develops after liberation, is deeply influenced by the concrete historical conditions of the country in question (Yao 2022; Lu and Yan 2022; Zhang 2022).

A further emphasis concerns liberating productive forces. After quoting the Communist Manifesto,¹⁷ Losurdo observes that the need to increase the productive forces as rapidly as possible took on a "special urgency" in countries that have "shaken off the colonial yoke." They need to "consolidate themselves economically" and find it necessary to "break the monopoly of the more powerful countries on more advanced technology" (Losurdo 2008b, 46). This is as true of Korea, Laos, and China, as it is of Vietnam. Losurdo mentions Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Workers' Party of North Vietnam after the death of Ho Chi Minh. Le Duan emphasized that the most important task—even before the successful conclusion of the struggle against US imperialism and the reunification of the country—is a "technical revolution." Le Duan continues: since "the productive forces play the decisive role," the Vietnamese communists need to focus their energies on "changing the backward state of our national economy and pushing forward the development of productive forces" (Le 1962, 109).¹⁸

The final point I would like to draw from Losurdo concerns the relationship with power, in the comprehensive sense of economic, political, social, and cultural power.

¹⁷ "The proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest, by degrees, all capital from the bourgeoisie, to centralize all instruments of production in the hands of the State, i.e. of the proletariat organized as the ruling class, and to increase the total of productive forces [*Produktionskräfte*] as rapidly as possible" (Marx and Engels [1848] 1976, 504; [1848] 2009, 52).

¹⁸ Worth noting here is the fact that when a socialist country does manage to achieve significant development in productive forces, it also scores highly and is a major contributor to global justice (see Gu et al. 2022).

From the Soviet Union to China, Marxism has developed in the context of socialism in power, if we may put it that way; by contrast, Western Marxism developed at an increasing distance from power.¹⁹ Losurdo writes of “Marxists in power and Marxists in opposition,” who became increasingly “alien to each other.” Indeed, “Western Marxism” came to see its “distance from power as a favourable condition” for what it saw as an “authentic” Marxism. For Losurdo, this is a “proud and perhaps arrogant self-confidence” that has—like Hegel’s “beautiful soul”—failed to understand Marx’s insight: “The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes, turning from its home, where it assumes respectable forms, to the colonies, where it goes naked” (Marx [1853] 1984, 252; Losurdo 2008b, 54).

For Losurdo, the most comprehensive contributions to the development of Marxism come from the situation of socialism in power, since—and it is a simple but profound point—this is the purpose of Marxism: to take power through a socialist revolution and set out on the socialist road. For Losurdo, this is the mainstream. The realization did not come without a struggle. As Azzarà (2021) points out, Losurdo came to reconsider the whole Marxist tradition after the tumultuous events of 1989 and what followed. He did so by delving deeply into the history of the Soviet Union, the lessons learned from the Communist movement, and above all his long engagement with the New China.²⁰ And it is from these realizations and the extensive study of what he calls “Eastern Marxism”—that is, the mainstream—that his deeply critical assessment of Western Marxism arose.

5 Conclusion: The Grand Hotel Abyss

In light of these resolute criticisms, as well as the constructive engagements with Marxism in developing countries, it would seem to be clear that the hegemony of Western Marxism is to all intents and purposes over. To be sure, one may find a few hangers-on, products of a by-gone age in the West. Throughout, I have presented the material against the backdrop of the Cold War. At times, this has come more to the fore (as with Rockhill’s studies), and at times it was more implicit, especially with the preemptory, near-imperialist, and at times racist dismissals of developing countries. Perhaps the key lies in the way Western Marxism produced a truncated Marxism, which severed the whole Marxist tradition that was to follow. This was precisely the tradition that was enriched through practice in countries from the Soviet Union to China.

Now it is possible to address the timeline of Western Marxism, specifically in terms of its historical rise, flourishing, and fall. As we saw, the term was first used about a decade after the Cold War was under way (Merleau-Ponty [1955] 1973), but

¹⁹ Earlier, I put this in terms of “before” and “after October,” before and after a successful socialist revolution.

²⁰ We may see some of the results over these years from published works (Losurdo 1994; 2000; 2008a; 2012).

it was not until the 1960s, and especially the 1970s, that Western Marxism would establish itself as the hegemonic ideological position in the few Western countries of the world. Journals and presses came under its sway, work after work was published propagating variations on the same themes, all of them predicated on a Cold-War determined rejection of “Soviet Orthodoxy,” or indeed a rejection of any country that had set out on the socialist road. If this *raison d’être* of Western Marxism is indeed the case, it follows that 1989’s “fall” of the Berlin Wall marks the beginning of the end. What are we to make of the two decades of the 1990s and early 2000s, which seem now like a suspended period characterized by the triumphalist slogan of the “end of history”? The 1990s were a decade of shock, disbelief, and disavowals of Marxism by not a few, while the first decade of the 2000s was a time of rear-guard action, seeking inspiration deep in the religious roots of Western culture (see above in relation to religiously inspired utopianism). And then the criticisms began to mount, core components of the ideological structure of Western Marxism began to be pulled apart, its complicity with the Cold War agenda became clear, as did its status as a winding tributary rather than the mainstream.²¹

By way of conclusion, allow me to return to Lukács. Earlier, I argued that Lukács should not be considered a “Western Marxist,” despite misleading claims by some. Indeed, in the 1962 preface to his earlier work, *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács reprised his image of the “Grand Hotel Abyss” (Lukács 1980, 243), in which now “a considerable part of the German intelligentsia, including Adorno, have taken up residence.” It is “a beautiful hotel, equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity. And the daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments, can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered” (Lukács 1971, 22).

Funding No funding.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Not applicable.

Code availability Not applicable.

Data availability Not applicable.

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²¹ The focus of this study concerns debates within a Western context. It would be another task to analyse how, for example, Chinese Marxist scholarship has approached and understood Western Marxism. The study by Chen Shuguang (2018, 10) indicates an initial rejection as not Marxist at all, a shift from the 1980s to deeper engagement, and then the assessment that Western Marxism is a tributary of the mainstream and is characterized by utopian tendencies and a “one-sided profundity.”

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