

# Leftism in the Post-Marxist Era

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We represent very different strands of the socialist left, defined by different priorities, different traditions, different cultures and different ways of operating. I am not here to discuss those differences. Nor am I here to represent my own particular organization's (DSA's) way of thinking. I speak to you as an individual, and I want to speak about a crisis of confidence that we are experiencing, to some degree no matter what tradition or organization of the socialist left we come from.

It is a crisis which we are also experiencing as individuals, each of us in our own minds and hearts: a sense of bafflement, alarm – even demoralization and (in some cases) despair. We cannot pretend it isn't there – we have to confront this crisis. We need to examine it, learn from it, and come out stronger for it.

The source of the crisis, very simply, is that the old certainties are gone. Our faith in the inevitability – sooner or later – of the democratic socialist transformation of human society has been shattered. Not, mind you, our belief in the justice or desirability of that transformation, but our belief that the dynamic of history was definitely going our way.

Let me explain for a moment what I mean by that sense of certainty or inevitability – because it is not something we explicitly stated. We were not “triumphalists” or determinists like so many in earlier generations of socialists. But we did have – say, two decades ago (and my apologies to those of you who are young enough so that this can only be a historical reference) – a sense of certainty, which had several sources:

1. We were seeing the emergence and in some cases the triumph of Third World revolutionary movements – in China, Algeria, Cuba, Vietnam, Angola, Nicaragua. The trend was powerful. It seemed to be unstoppable.
2. We knew that a near-majority of the world's people already were socialists, or at least members of societies that called themselves “socialist.” So, if you didn't look too closely at these societies, or – if you believed (as I know I did) that the natural next step beyond bad “socialism” would be “good,” democratic socialism – you could take heart from the numerical success of “socialism,” find excuses for its failings, and pray for its inevitable democratization.
3. We believed in Marxism. Although there were all different kinds of

Marxists, most who called themselves Marxists were sustained by what they took to be a “science” or at least a damn good theory, which said that capitalism would crash under the weight of its own contradictions and that the working class would rise up to bring about a just and free society – sooner or later.

Well, here we are today:

1. The once unstoppable trend toward Third World revolution has been stopped – *is* being stopped – everywhere, by the combined economic and military power of international capitalism and the U.S. Pentagon.
2. The “defects” of communism in the Second World turned out to be so great – and the level of rage against the communist elites so intense – that, far from going in a democratic socialist direction, many in the post-communist world now embrace the economic theories of Milton Friedman, Margaret Thatcher, and Ronald Reagan. (In fact, there is no better proof of the failure of communist societies than the fact they never even managed to educate their citizens – in a believable way, that is – about the real hazards of capitalism.)
3. Then there's the “science” of Marxism and its predictions of imminent capitalist collapse. Well, it hasn't happened. Maybe it will – but so far, capitalism has shown amazing resilience (and when its resilience has failed, there is always the alternative of war). At this point, no one can deny the dynamism of capitalism, its expansionism, its global reach, and its ability to bring continuing affluence and comfort to – at least – the elites of the world.

So here we are. There are no certainties, no guarantees. There is no “scientific,” all-embracing theory to light our way – to tell us, “If you do a, b, and c” (organize the proletariat, form a party, whatever), “then peace and justice will prevail.” We don't have that. The question I want to address, then, is this: Is it possible to be a leftist without the certainty, without the theory – the over-arching theory represented by “Marxism”?

My answer, of course, is Yes. But my answer is more than “Yes.” My answer is “It's about time.”

My answer is “Yes” because there were leftists, radicals, socialists even before Marx and there will be (of this I am quite sure) long after us. Where, after all, did Marxism come from? From the mind of one genius? Well, partly. But he got his idea of socialism – his critique of capitalism – from what was already an ongoing working-class socialist movement, a movement which had no great theory to guide it, no certainties, no guarantees, only the manifest necessity of struggling for a better break for the overworked and downtrodden.

Of course, if we look at the American radical and left tradition – in which we perhaps should have been finding our roots all along – we find that the Marxists, orthodox or otherwise, are vastly outnumbered by the anarchists, the populists, the African-American radicals, the pacifists, the feminists, the religious radicals. Our radical tradition should never be forgotten; it is a rich and ebullient mix that embraces Emma Goldman and Big Bill Haywood,

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and John Brown – hardly an orthodox crowd!

So yes, it is possible to be a radical, a leftist, without the certainties which we had imagined, once, that we had. In fact, as I said, it's about time! It's about time that we entered the post-Marxist era.

I don't say that in order to repudiate Marx's thought, which is no more responsible for Stalin or Ceaucescu than the ideas of Jesus Christ are responsible for Jimmy Swaggert or Jerry Falwell or the Grand Inquisitor. In fact, I think we are going to need Marxist ways of analysis to understand what happened within the "socialist" societies, just as we are going to need them to follow the fascinating and possibly devastating class developments in the post-communist world.

We certainly need Marxist ways of thinking to comprehend the dynamics of capitalist society, which now – just as 150 years ago – rests on the exploitation of human labor, i.e., on the theft of human time, energy, and life for the profit of the few. No, the problem with Marxism is not that it couldn't explain things – because it certainly does – but that it couldn't explain *enough* things.

There is, for example, gender oppression. Despite Engels, despite the many tortured and convoluted efforts of some theorists to make capitalism and sexism into one seamless, mutually reinforcing system, the truth is that Marxism does not offer a theory of rape, of battering, of the routine contempt for women that characterizes sexist society. It illuminates the capitalist exploitation of women's status – i.e., as cheap labor – but it cannot (and cannot be expected) to account for male supremacy, which predates capitalism and probably predates class society itself. As for homophobia, our society's frenzied reaction to sexual diversity, however expressed – I'm sorry to say there is nothing about it in *Das Kapital* or even in the *Grundrisse*. Theory-wise, on matters of gender and sexual preference, we're on our own and always have been.

Then there is racism, arguably the most serious and dangerous tension in U.S. society today. There are Marxist theories of race and racism, but there is no one canonical theory of racism. Here again the roots go deeper than capitalism are probably as ancient as war, as ancient as the violent subjugation of one people by another.

Or war itself, the greatest of human evils: You will find no theory of war, which is at least 12,000 years old and which has been waged for every imaginable reason – for loot, for honor, for nothing at all. The "science" of Marxism has no explanation for these many millennia of organized murder.

And, of course, Marxism has little to say about a problem which did not much concern people in the 19th century, the destruction of the human habitat, through the predations of both capitalist and socialist industrial societies. I would include under this topic a problem that many American Marxists have been exceedingly reluctant to acknowledge, but which can no longer be denied: overpopulation.

So, where do we go from here? Without the false certainty that the triumph

of democratic socialism is inevitable? Without the false comfort of one big overarching theory?

I am not going to answer that question in a pragmatic way, by claiming to have some new strategy, some list of key issues and priorities. I am going to try to answer it in a more personal, even existential way – the question being, what are the roots and sources of our radicalism in the nineties? What defines us as leftists in the post-Marxist era?

I can see two parts to an answer (if there are more, I trust you to help fill them in):

First, we are leftists for reasons that are simply moral. Moral commitment is the bedrock of political activism – it always was, at bottom, and always will be. To be a socialist is to have made a moral commitment to take the side of the underdog, the downtrodden – no matter how marginalized or stigmatized or beaten down they may be. This means a moral allegiance to the economically oppressed: the hungry, the underpaid, the homeless and all those whose lives are drained and diminished by the necessity of exploitative labor. All that goes without saying.

But our commitment to the poor goes beyond economic betterment, just as our notion of the "underdog" concerns much more than an economic category. We also stand for what a genuine left has always stood for: human dignity and freedom, no matter how or by whom they are threatened and abridged. This extends to:

- those who are mistreated or discriminated against on the grounds of race or sex or sexuality (whatever their class!). We stand by them.
- the upper middle-class black family that is not allowed to buy a house in an affluent neighborhood. We stand by them.
- the woman, the gay man, the Asian person, whoever fears to walk out at night because of harassment and danger. We stand for them.
- those who are silenced – the artist whose work cannot be shown, the writer whose books are banned or burned, even the most sexist rap musician if he is told he cannot speak. We stand for them.

We have to, because we are socialists, which means we are egalitarians. And because we are egalitarians we oppose domination in every form it takes, and seek to build a society in which every person is honored and valued, in which every voice can be heard.

But the socialist left is not defined by its moral imperative alone. If there is one thing we will carry with us from the Marxist tradition – and from so many representatives of that tradition (I think of Rosa Luxembour, Antonio Gramsci, Mao Zedong, Amilcar Cabral, and many, many others) – it is the imperative to *comprehend* the world so that we may better change it.

Karl Marx said, the point of understanding the world is to change it. Note that he assumed the importance of *understanding* the world, because he knew that nothing could be changed just by flailing around in moral outrage. In this respect, perhaps more than any other, too many contemporary "Marxists" missed the point: There was a tendency, a temptation to get lazy – to rely on

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century-old ideas as if they were scripture.

But Marxism-as-scripture was ironically a betrayal of the Marxist intellectual tradition, which is by its nature irreverent, restless, inquisitive, and relentlessly seeking to comprehend the human situation in its entirety – both those things that change from year to year (the capitalist economy, for example) and those things that endure for centuries (racism, militarism, gender oppression). All of it!

Marx never said, “Here’s the truth, go forth and make a fetish out of it.” He said, and I hope you will forgive this paraphrasing: Find out what’s going on. Find out who’s getting rich and who’s getting hurt. Find out who’s in charge and how the system works. Find the weak spots. Think, investigate, challenge, organize!