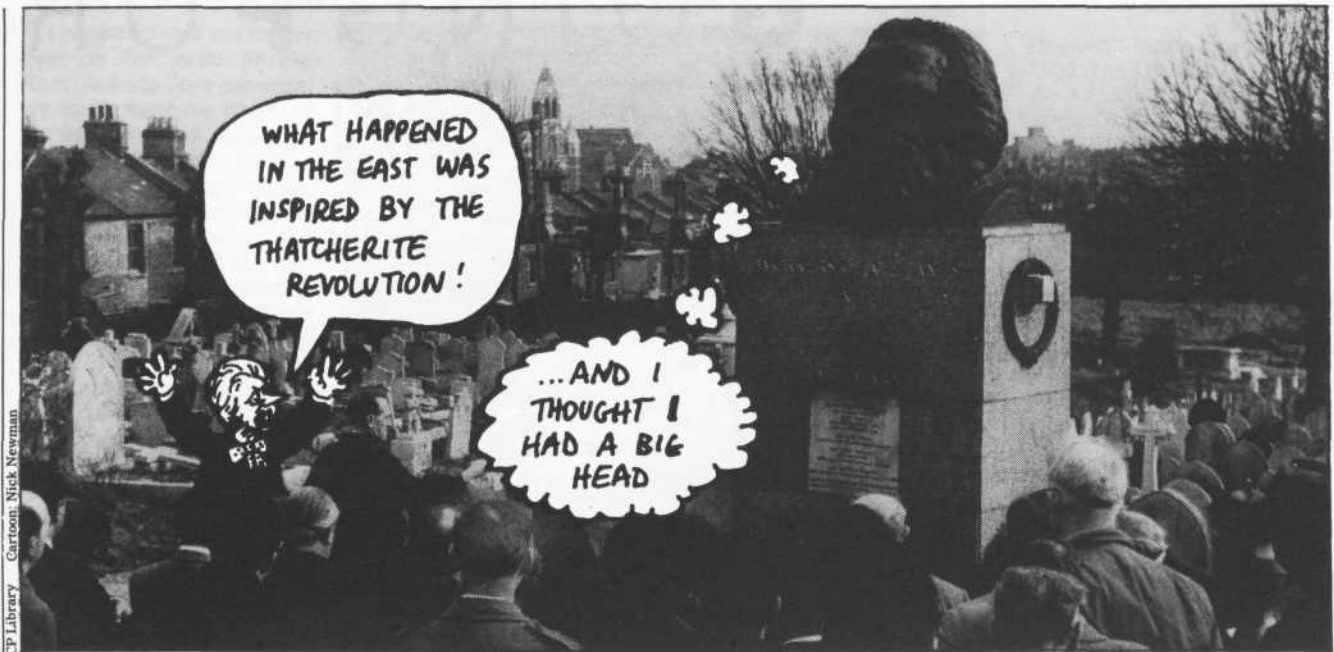


Gareth Stedman Jones separates the ideas from the creed

Marx After Marxism



CP Library Cartoon: Nick Newman

The Berlin Wall has been breached. The people have been in the streets in Prague, Warsaw, Budapest, Sofia and Bucharest. A revolution has spread with a momentum that recalls those of 1848 and 1918. A revolution against communism. The long historical cycle begun in 1917 has now come to an end. Leninism no longer has meaning as a political project and its end has been inglorious - the brutality of Tiananmen Square, the pathetic luxuries of an Erich Honecker, and the Caligula-esque monstrosities of the Ceausescu dynasty.

So what is left? This question must be posed in a double sense, since however much the communism of Eastern Europe has seemed a caricature of socialist aspiration, the vehemence with which ordinary people have expressed their total rejection of the communist legacy in all its forms cannot but put in doubt what the identity of the Left now is.

To this question, some will answer that leninism may be over, but marxism remains intact. Marxism, they will say, is not to be confused with leninism; nor compromised by the Stalinist practices of communist states. And without marxism, what would be left of the critique of capitalism? Once on that course, they will go on, we would all sooner or later be joining that exultant chorus proclaiming the victory of the West.

Loyalty is no doubt an honourable sentiment and intransigence is an understandable first response to political confusion. But any attempt to insulate marxism from the end of communism is mistaken. It will ultimately do the Left more harm than good.

Those insights of Marx which made an impact beyond his immediate political following have long ago been absorbed into the mainstream of social-democratic and liberal thought. Among these was a uniquely powerful image of the global energy and unrelenting expansiveness of capitalism, an unforgettable focus upon the authority relations of modern industry, and a dramatisation of the structural antagonism generated by this productive process. More generally, Marx's dialectic of content and form has bred innumerable intellectual offshoots in the 20th century, just as the imaginative power with which he highlighted the dizzying volatility of modern economic and social life provided some of the basic premises of modernism in literature and in the arts. At the

most general level, Marx's work has entered our language, transforming our questions about the world as profoundly as Machiavelli before him and Freud after him.

But the organisation of Marx's ideas into what came to be called 'marxism' is quite another matter. For 'marxism' dealt in articles of faith rather than inescapable truths. Marx was far more successful in evoking the power of capitalism than in demonstrating in any conclusive fashion why it had to come to an end. It was eloquence rather than science which established the association between the end of capitalism and the destiny of the working class. His conviction of a future society based upon a higher notion of freedom amounted to no more than a few cryptic utterances, unsubstantiated either by evidence or logic. Finally, despite the claims of his followers, he never succeeded in establishing a coherent theory of the connections between property relations and political forms. As a result, his refusal to accept that capitalism might be controlled by political reform and collective pressure was ultimately a dogmatic assertion.

Marxism, in this sense of a set of unsubstantiated claims, cannot stand aside from what has now happened in Eastern Europe. Marx was no more responsible for the Gulag than Nietzsche was for Auschwitz. But it is the case that the legitimacy claimed by Lenin and Stalin was that bequeathed by Marx, and the sad fact is that after all allowance has been made for 'backwardness' and 'underdevelopment', the one social and political alternative to capitalism constructed on the basis of Marx's ideas, although arguably more egalitarian, has also proved itself to be more authoritarian, less efficient and less desirable than the system it was supposed to replace.

For all these reasons, it is time that the Left abandoned its adherence to marxism as an indivisible unity of theory and creed. Ideas, not creeds, are what is wanted. Marx is only one of many sources from which a renewal of socialist thinking might come about, and the need for that thinking is as pressing as ever. For the gulf between the world's rich and poor is as great as ever; inhuman forms of labour, indebtedness and intimidation are still to be combatted. New conflicts have emerged while old ones persist. But it is now up to the Left to create a fresh sense of an alternative. •

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