

Marxism After Marx

Critical Condition

From Monty Johnstone, member of the Communist Party's theory and ideology committee

In his leader, 'Marx After Marxism' (*MT* February), Gareth Stedman Jones argues that the repressive regimes we have seen in Eastern Europe reflect badly on Marx.

He accepts, of course, that 'Marx was no more responsible for the gulag than Nietzsche was for Auschwitz'. However, he insists, 'the legitimacy claimed by Lenin and Stalin was that bequeathed by Marx' and 'the one social and political alternative to capitalism constructed on the basis of Marx's ideas' was authoritarian, inefficient and undesirable.

Gareth's inference is neither fair nor logical. How can Marx be held responsible for claims to his legitimacy made long after his death and for their own reasons by Stalin or anyone else? And were such monstrous societies as those of Stalin, Pol Pot and Ceausescu really 'constructed on the basis of Marx's ideas'?

Right from his first articles denouncing censorship as a 'law of suspicion against freedom', Marx's outlook was profoundly democratic. Throughout his life he argued for popular self-government, unbridled by bureaucratic secrecy, paternalism and privilege. He highlighted this as the most important characteristic of the Paris Commune of 1871, represent-

ing a foretaste of the freer socialist society for which he worked.

Marxism Today has for decades carried articles (including some by myself) pointing out the contrast between the repressive character of East European regimes and Marx's objective of making the state 'completely subordinate to society'. So I can see no reason why we should view the further exposure and overthrow of such systems through popular revolts as a reason for abandoning marxism.

Gareth's criticisms of marxism predate recent events in Eastern Europe by many years. He only accepts as much of Marx as has 'long ago been absorbed into the mainstream of social-democratic and liberal thought'. He rejects the rest as 'articles of faith' - a 'creed' based on 'a set of unsubstantiated claims'.

These objections are far from new, and marxists have time and again explained why they find them misconceived and unconvincing. This is obviously no reason for rejecting them out of hand. They represent a serious point of view, the pros and cons of which need to be argued in the columns of *Marxism Today*, which should certainly be open to critics like Gareth.

I do, however, find it inappropriate that his repudiation of marxism should appear as an *MT* leader - reinforced by a cover attacking Marx with

crucial role in the struggle against apartheid and why it was legalised at the same moment that the communist parties of Eastern Europe failed?

How do we explain the inspiration that marxism provided over the past century to millions of people, including poets, artists and intellectuals, if it turned out to be such a dogmatic assertion? To remain true to history, I believe we must recognise that marxism was a legitimisation for oppression and dictatorship.

Marx analysed, as no other political thinker did, the fate of oppressed and exploited people as the consequence of the class system in industrialising society. That's why he was the theoretician of the workers' movement in the industrial era. That's why he is still the main theoretician of Third-World liberation movements.

As a revolutionary thinker of

tomatoes! - which might well be taken (wrongly) to represent the view of the magazine's editorial board and of the Communist Party.

Engels wrote: 'Marx's whole outlook is not a doctrine but a method. It provides no ready-made dogmas, but reference points for further investigation and the method for this investigation.' *MT* has long seen marxism in such terms, rather than as quasi-religious 'articles of faith'. What justification could there be for changing that view now?

Marxism has to build on and critically develop the seminal ideas of Marx and Engels in today's world. Its claim to be scientific requires it constantly to evolve, to reappraise earlier conclusions and to enrich itself by analysing new experience and by discriminatingly absorbing ideas from other sources (feminism, greenery, etc.).

Such an approach is particularly needed in evaluating events in Eastern Europe, which have moved more rapidly and taken more complex forms than any of us expected. I hope that *MT* will contribute to this process as a *marxist* theoretical and discussion journal. Its job is not to follow the fashionable trend of killing-off marxism ('Marx After Marxism') without seriously examining its ability to help us understand and influence the dramatic times in which we live.

resistance Marx was brilliant, as a strategist of socialism he was as unilinear and dogmatic as the developing industrial system of his time. That's where he failed dramatically. He got stuck in the antithesis of capital-labour, neglecting democracy, failing to analyse the antithesis between the two sexes and between culture and nature.

The renewed Left knew this long before the Berlin Wall came down. New movements have been influencing the thinking of the Left during the last 10 years, already pushing marxism from centre-stage. Events in Eastern Europe place marxism in an even more critical light. But the gap between rich and poor, the growing international power of capital and failing democratic control over it do not render new analysis within the marxist tradition superfluous. We don't have to start all over again.

Problem Solving

From Gavin Kitching, sociology lecturer at North London Polytechnic

I do not see how anyone can deny that marxism is a busted flush, if by 'marxism' one means that tradition of thought which claimed that a better world could be created through the replacement of capitalism by a 'planned economy' in which all market relations were to be eliminated. I also agree with Gareth Stedman Jones that those more democratic traditions of Western marxism which never endorsed the marxist-leninist project, have *politically* been incorporated into social democracy.

However, marxism never has been simply a political tradition. It is also an *intellectual* tradition. Anyone who has been steeped in it learns, I believe, certain ways of thinking.

Two characteristics of this intellectual tradition are particularly important. The first is a deep historicism, ie, a conviction that profound social and political changes require long spans of time, and more specifically, that there are always certain material preconditions to be fulfilled before new forms of politics can emerge. This can degenerate into a deterministic evolutionism, but it does not have to. At its strongest it simply takes the form of a dogged insistence that there are *necessary but insufficient* material preconditions for certain forms of politics to triumph, and that if these preconditions are not met those forms of politics will be abortive. Conversely, if they *are* met then such a politics becomes possible (but not necessary).

A variant of the latter argument is that marxist-leninist regimes dig their own graves by creating intelligentsias and working classes which are too intellectually sophisticated for the political forms in which they are trapped and which are also possessed of both material and cultural aspirations that such regimes cannot satisfy. This means that when a Mikhail Gorbachev appears, his project will have broad social roots of support, and will indeed succeed (if it does) primarily for that reason.

My second characteristic is a development of the first. Marx gave marxism its deep historicism. Parvus and Trotsky buttressed it against naive evolutionism through the concept of 'uneven and combined devel-

Premature Farewell

Ina Brouwer is a Dutch MP for the Green Left (Groen Links)

Marxism, argues Gareth Stedman Jones, provided too much legitimisation for the politics of Lenin and Stalin to insulate it from the end of communism. Therefore the Left should abandon it.

Although I share many of his conclusions (the connection between marxism-leninism-stalinism, for example) by the end of the article I have lost his thread. Must we really start all over again? Was marxism in the end a huge collective error? I find his analysis too imprecise, his conclusion too vague to be able to agree.

His farewell to marxism is too much predicated on the collapse of Eastern Europe and too little by rethinking the whole of the new developments. For example, what is our explanation for how the Communist Party of South Africa played such a

opment'. I find I cannot think about the modern (or post-modern?) world without this concept, for industrialism has created a world *so* unevenly developed, in which economic, social and cultural forms are combined in *such* bewilderingly complex ways that the conventional politics of both Left and Right are defeated.

The cold war may have threatened us all with nuclear annihilation, but at least it gave the 'Great Powers' a motive - however perverse - for taking an in-terest in the Third World minnows. Now they may simply agree to ignore the whole damned mess. I am thinking about Africa here, but even in Africa there is hope. A black majority-ruled South Africa - free, democratic, but still a powerful capitalist state - could perhaps do more to help the development of the rest of Africa than the whole Western (and Eastern) aid industry put together. An ironical fruit of combined and uneven development!

I am not quite sure what all this demonstrates. Perhaps only that marxism as an intellectual tradition can still provide an insight and a context for our own lives and the broad dynamics of the world. Above all, marxism teaches us that history is not a morality tale, primarily because the outcomes of human actions cannot be read off from the intentions of human actors.

If Marshall Berman is right and what differentiates modernist consciousness from all previous forms is *irony* - then marxism too is, and will remain, central to modern consciousness. For marxism is irony turned into a method of study and a mode of analysis. But it is not an emptily cynical irony. For it knows, not perhaps that 'mankind always sets itself *only* such problems as it can solve' (too much Victorian optimism there), but that when we have something defined as a problem that is a sure sign that we are looking for a solution. And, historically speaking, the human species' track record in problem-solving isn't at all bad.

Beyond Liberalism

Most readers of *Marxism Today* enjoy the irony in its title. 'Orthodox' marxism has long been out of favour on the democratic and critical Left. It has been displaced as 'the' mode of analysis, succeeded

by a decentred ideological pluralism of more democratic and less messianic theories.

'New times' undoubtedly means facing up to this displacement of marxism's centrality as 'the' theory of the Left. Marxism is an authoritarian, totalising, reductive, and thus reactionary discourse, which is associated with a conservative, outmoded and dogmatic brand of politics. It has a severely limited democratic content and no concept of pluralism.

Add to this its claim to be the only scientific knowledge of history and its association with leninist vanguardism, and the problems become obvious. Together with leninism, marxism is undoubtedly culpable to an extent in the crimes of the like of Stalin and Ceausescu, and in the crassness of contemporary trotskyism (a very closely-related expression of the same set of problems). Who'd live in a country run by SWP/RCP-type groups? Just imagine.

Marxism has become the fetter to its own theoretical, as well as political, development. It has served certain historical purposes, but has become a dead weight, restricting progressive theory and practice. The burial of orthodoxy, with what little dignity it can retain, will emancipate the Left.

But it is a left critique of marxism which is required and emphatically not a return to liberalism. There are substantial spaces for such a critique, as various democratic struggles around issues such as sexuality, gender, race and the environment have shown. Marxism must be appraised in the way that Marx himself appraised capitalism: as progressive, but historically limited, transient and thus transcendable. All that was solid is indeed turning to air, and this must include marxism.

What little of marxism the democratic Left retains is a creative, flexible and open interpretation which does not continually subsume other progressive ideas in a form of discursive imperialism, but rather takes its place alongside the other discourse of the pluralist Left. As the 'orthodox' critics have been pointing out for years, this heretical interpretation is not 'real' marxism. But the more distance *MT* can establish from their ossified blind faith the better.

Post-marxism, as Laclau and Mouffe have declared, requires no apologies.

Peter Davies, Cardiff

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Turkey On Edge

As a Turk studying in Britain, I read with interest Martin Kettle's article 'Whose Common Home?' (*MT* February). In the context of Europe's relationship to Islam, he talks of the 'pivotal importance of Turkey in the emerging Europe'.

This may be so but I must confess that my own country often seems like a queer fish, even to me.

Being Asian and European, Mediterranean and Middle-Eastern, and with a long history dating back to the Hittites, it cannot be neatly placed in any geographical, cultural or historical category.

I do believe that contemporary Turkey is the outcome of 200 years of interaction with the market of Europe, and therefore its destiny is inextricably linked to that of wider Europe. But things might move in a different direction in the short term, especially after the decision by the European Community to delay Turkey's membership and with the Soviet Union in danger of breaking up.

Both the slamming of the door by the EC and the prospect of Turkic peoples seceding from the Soviet Union will fan the flames of dormant pan-Turkism and already-active Islamic fundamentalism.

I am afraid the fragile far-from-perfect Turkish democracy might be interrupted again by the military using 'the critical external situation' as an excuse. I hope my fears prove wrong.

HS Lim, Norwich

Right-on Reck

I enjoyed Rick Glanvill's article on 'Eurofusion' (*MT* January), but take exception to his use of the word 'yuppie'.

The Gipsy Kings appeal to me, but I'm no yuppie. I am a working-class socialist who loathes the 'I'm alright Jack' culture of the yuppie. Would Rick Glanvill please print a list of all the bands that are 'right-on' for a socialist to listen to?

I have listened to Brazilian music for the last 20 years. Should I suddenly eschew it because it has become fashionable with the Thatcherite whizz-kids?

The bands that David Byrne highlighted on his compilation *Beleza Tropical* are the latest in a long line. This is not 'appropriation', rather exposure to a wider 'world' audience.

Patrick Connelly, Oldham

Keeping Feminism Alive

Your article 'Sisters Under The Skin' (*MT* February) fulfils many of the issues raised by Rosalind Coward. You ask the question of two middle-class women who have been aware of feminist issues for 20 or so years. This is only slightly more worthwhile than asking Mrs Thatcher if privatisation is a good thing: you can't expect a balanced answer.

For millions of women feminism is not old hat. If they have encountered feminist ideas at all, it has been through the weakened and distorting forms of the popular media. For many ordinary women, feminist ideas are as energising and liberating as they were to Rosalind Coward 20 years ago.

As an ordinary woman (except by virtue of a late higher education) I regularly meet women who are just as oppressed as our great-grandmothers were, for whom the existence and communication of feminist ideas is of crucial importance.

It's all very well talking of theoretical developments, or the continuing relevance of feminism to women today, but this presumes a uniformity of awareness and response which has never existed. The marginalisation and obliteration of feminist ideas historically has frustrated any consistent development of feminist theory, practice or political movement.

From generation to generation women do not have the opportunity to read feminist literature or women's ideas which may convey different perceptions of the world. Continuous and extended communication of women's ideas between women is as important as ever.

I can assure you that feminism is as relevant as it ever

was - and some of us will violently resist it once again being rendered invisible.

Sharon Marriotti, Shipley

Trends For The Times

Your fascinating analysis of the state of the Left in 'After Communism' and the round-table discussion (*MT* January) omitted two important trends.

The first is the fact that the best and most successful companies in the world have succeeded in aligning the interests of their employees with those of the company.

All the new techniques of 'total quality', 'just-in-time manufacturing', etc, require full participation and commitment by the workforce.

This has led to a degree of 'democratisation' of the workplace in the leading-edge companies which was never envisaged by theorists of either the left or right.

As this trend spreads under the spur of competition, the pressure by consumers on the public services to follow suit will become overwhelming. This will require a complete rethink by trade unions of their role in society.

The second trend is the increased alienation of many young urban males. The challenge for society is how to channel their aggressive tendencies into positive gains for society and not into violence and macho competition. This is the obverse of the great and welcome gains made by feminists.

A programme for the Left that ignores the first trend because it does not sit comfortably with the idea of class struggle, or dismisses the second as just a symptom of Thatcherism, will get nowhere.

EL Neufeld, London

Women And Islam

A pity that Gautam Sen (Forum, *MT* Feb) had to ruin his otherwise excellent letter by his ill-considered swipe at the Southall Black Sisters. It is just this sort of emotional blackmail and arm-twisting that they wish to resist. Would Gautam Sen prefer that some Asian women continued to endure barbaric treatment at the hands of their menfolk in silence?

Women's groups are visible and very active in India. Far from active complicity and selling out to the host community, the Black Sisters group provides much-needed assistance to long-suffering Asian women.

Their counter-demonstration on the day of the anti-Rushdie march was a protest against patriarchalism and authoritarianism in all its forms, including fundamentalism - and not just the Islamic variety. They were certainly not demonstrating against Islam.

Gautam Sen diagnoses Islamic fundamentalism as a reaction to racism and economic exploitation. This could well be true. But what is his stance in the Rushdie affair? Is Salman Rushdie a 'nice middle-class Asian'? I hope that Sen is not guilty of the same indiscriminating intolerance that he accuses Julie Burchill of.

Malathy Sitaram, Swindon

Last year, and very publicly (a bit Western and self-indulgent, this display of private emotion, no?), Miss Yasmin Alibhai decided that as her husband had left her for a young blonde woman, Western society was horrid and meaningless and that this wouldn't happen in her own community of Ismaili Muslims (*MT* Dec).

Allow me to draw your attention to the recent behaviour of the Aga Khan, spiritual leader of the Ismaili Muslims - Miss Alibhai's chosen people, and her refuge from a fickle and promiscuous culture. He has just - yes, you've guessed it - left his wife of 20 years for a young blonde woman! Men! Eh, Yas?

Julie Burchill, London

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