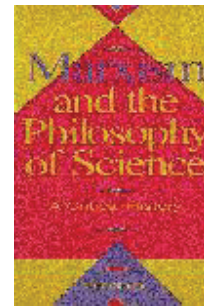


The Fate of Marxism

Introduction to 2nd edition of

Marxism & the Philosophy of Science: A Critical History

by Helena Sheehan



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This is the introduction to the 2nd edition (1993). The 1st edition was published in 1985.

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So much water has flowed under the bridge, so many tides have come in and gone out again, since the story set out here ended. Days of spectacular advance, days of stark defeat, still lay ahead.

After 1945, partisans came down from the mountains and up from the underground and became professors in the academies of the new order, which came after the devastation of war and the defeat of fascism. In Eastern Europe, and soon after in Asia, followed by areas of Latin America and Africa, the institutions of marxism in power multiplied dramatically. Marxism was in the ascendancy in the universities, research institutes, and journals of the new socialist states.

For some, adherence to marxism was a matter of deepest conviction. For others, it was brazen compulsion or abject conformity. It was the difference between living fire and stagnant water. It was the dissonance between the elation of discovering a pattern in history and the shock of finding show trials to be part of the pattern. It was the distance from the long march through "let a thousand flowers bloom" to the ravages of the red guards. It was the gulf between Paris in May and Prague in August of 1968.

The contradiction between the two forces played itself out over and over in a continuing drama, one that could only end in tragedy. The codes and procedures of the one party state could never be the dynamism of a vibrant intellectual force. In the end, socialism could only be built upon consent. Such consent could not be enforced by constitutional provision or policed by a state security apparatus. In fact, it proved altogether antithetical to such measures.

However, through all the purges of institutes and editorial boards, through all the politburo decrees and dogmatic denunciations, there was still something vital there struggling for life. There was more even to zhdanovism than the policing of intellectual life.¹ It was an assertion of the ideological character of all knowledge, all art, all science. It was a belief that philosophy was a fundamental force in the social order. It often had farcical consequences, to be sure: lysenkoite falsification of experimental results, preparation of delegations to international philosophical congresses as if for Warsaw Pact maneuvers, barbarous editing that made every text sound exactly the same, equally dead and equally deadening.²

So many stories, so many intricate biographies, shaped in such complex ways by this turbulent history, come rushing through me, as I try to convey something of my sense of this period and to break the hold of the clichés of the prevailing view of it. The philosophers and scientists, whom I came to know, were troubled true believers, as well as cynics, cowards, careerists, and conformists.

Their different fates will haunt me to the end of my days: Wolfgang Harich, defending his own imprisonment to me; Radovan Richta, leading reformer, then leading normalizer, fearful, compromised, embodying a tortured ambiguity, knowing better than what he did; Adam Schaff, Svetozar Stojanovic and Mihailo Markovic, in their quite different ways both loyal and dissident and always lucid.³ Others, such as Herbert Horz, managed to live and work, even high up in the structures of political-academic power, without such sharp conflicts. They were not all of the sort who predominate in any society, that is, those who serve not truth, but power. Some managed to serve truth as well as power ... at least for a time.

There was enlightened and honorable work done in philosophy and science. It is important to say so now, as hardly anyone will say it, but it is nonetheless true.

There were controversies continuing from the prewar period, and there were new ones too, all of them rooted in efforts to work out the most appropriate lines of connection between philosophy, politics and science and to come to terms with the times. New interpretations of marxism, coinciding with contemporary philosophical currents, struggled for assent. There came existentialism, phenomenology, neopositivism, poststructuralism, postmodernism ... and finally post-marxism.

Marxism became a formidable force, not only in countries defining themselves as socialist, but in the most prototypically capitalist ones as well. With the emergence of the new left, marxism made its influence felt in the academies of the west (more an

ideological concept than a geographical one). Although it never took state power, it did seize the intellectual and moral initiative for a time. The new left posed new questions to the old left as well as to the old right and ever shifting centre. Eurocommunism represented a merging of old and new left currents, which promised much in its moment. The most vibrant debates of the day were conducted within the arena of marxism.

This text is a product of that period. Reading it again, I have been glad to rediscover and reappropriate it. I stand over it unreservedly, more than ever confirmed in my rejection of the corrupting pressures bearing upon me at the time, whether from east or west, from left or right. I have left the text as it was, except for typographical corrections and references to a second volume covering the postwar period, which will not now be written by me, because of complex circumstances and shifting priorities in my own work.

However, it is necessary to remark upon the difference between the 'now' of the text and the 'now' of the publication of the paperback edition.

In the intervening time, the storm clouds have burst and the dams have broken. Now, after the deluge, we stand amid the ruins of our ravaged utopia and ask hard questions about the tragedy that has engulfed it.

Marxists had built a world view based on a vision of history as moving, in however complicated a way, in the direction of a transition from capitalism to socialism, only to see the opposite happening before our eyes. This after having our hopes raised that socialism could be reformed, that the promises of glasnost and perestroika could be fulfilled, hopes that have been dashed against the rocks of history.

East and west, marxism has fallen.

In the west, marxism is scorned by those swept off their feet in postmodernist pastiche. The new left, overtaken by the new right, has scattered to the four winds. Many enthusiasts of eurocommunism proved more euro than communist, and there didn't seem much point in continuing to publish *Marxism Today* after its editor and many of its authors had long since ceased to be marxist, no matter how far the term was stretched.

In the east, marxism has been transformed from orthodoxy to apostasy overnight; from witch-hunter to witch-hunted, some might say. But those who were the inquisitors then are often the inquisitors now, some transmuted with dizzying speed from obedient apparatchiks to born-again free-marketeters. Honest intellectuals will have as hard a time under the new order as under the old, some even harder.

For a brief moment, it was otherwise. Banned books gathered crowds at the window displays of Berlin's bookshops. The theories of Bukharin and Bahro were discussed with urgent intensity and reviewed as if they had just been published.⁴ Now airport best-sellers have replaced them. Those who had breathed the air of the Prague Spring lifted their heads in the sun once more, only to be cast aside again. *World Marxist Review*

suddenly went from being mind-numbingly boring to amazingly stimulating, just before the political base sustaining it collapsed.

Everything opened up, just before closing down again.

Marxism has perhaps never been at such a low ebb. It is generally thought at present to have an inglorious past and no future.

This text, however, is testimony to the glory, as well as the terror, of its past. It will not do to dismiss it. Nor will it do to appeal to a pure, unadulterated marxism untouched by all this tragedy; to touch the totems of its classical texts as if they were platonic forms; to rescue Marx from Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and finally from Gorbachev. Whatever marxism is, it is in and through the whole bloody messy human process that is its history. At all times, there was intelligence and integrity in it, even if mixed with stupidity and treachery all along the way. It is a rich and complex story, and I am proud to tell it here.

As to its future, we shall see.

Despite such devastating disaffection and desertion and denunciation, I do not believe that it will disappear. Despite everything, it still has an explanatory and ethical power persisting through all its problems and cutting through all the confused and craven chatter surrounding it. Questions of world view cannot be settled by majority vote. The problems that gave rise to it have not yet been solved.

All is not well in contemporary intellectual life, any more than in any other area of contemporary life. The battle of ideas has not yet been won.⁵

Arguably, marxism is still the only mode of thought capable of coming to terms with the complexities of contemporary experience. It is still unsurpassed in its capacity for clarity, coherence, comprehensiveness and credibility.

Within its resources are perhaps the only possibilities for penetrating the meaning even of events that its previous adherents never anticipated. The potency of marxism is not so much in any of its existing tenets as in its habit of large-scale and deep-rooted thinking, discerning the trajectory of history as it comes, looking for a pattern of interconnections where others see only random chaos, going back further into the past, reaching wider within the present, facing with greater composure into the future.

Marxism may be rejected, but it has not been refuted. It still needs to be seriously studied and critically considered. Books such as this still deserve to be read and the story they tell to be reassessed and reappropriated.

Marxism may be repudiated, but it resonates nevertheless.

Helena Sheehan
Dublin, 1992

NOTES:

1) Zhdanovism refers to the post-war campaign bringing ideological analysis to bear upon the arts and sciences, named after Andrei Zhdanov, a close associate of Stalin, who was the ideological spokesman of the central committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

2) I once got drawn into a Kafkaesque dispute with a Soviet editor in Prague, Ivan Frolov (who emerged later as a top advisor to Gorbachev and was editor of Pravda at the time of the August 1991 coup), which resulted in a text (a chapter in *Dialectical Materialism and Modern Science* Prague 1978) published in my name, which bore almost no resemblance to anything I had written, even expressing views contrary to my own in several places. It was a violation of my intellectual and moral standards in procedures that had become routine in such institutions as *World Marxist Review*. It was part of a set of converging circumstances, which made me leave the Communist Party in 1979.

3) Harich (GDR), Richta (Czechoslovakia), Schaff (Poland), Stojanovic and Markovic (Yugoslavia) and Horz (GDR) were all prominent philosophers and party members, whose fates represent the various problems even the most committed Marxists had with the politics of Marxist orthodoxy. So many sad stories came my way. Once I was torn between attending an official reception or remaining outside to hear a terrible tale of denunciation, purging, suicide, exile. Another time I had a most disturbing encounter with a once prominent philosopher, whom I found living like a forgotten and frightened animal in an attic, still afraid of the light, after everything had changed.

4) Rudolf Bahro *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* London: New Left Books, 1978.

5) Despite Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

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