Adventures in Marxism

(Draft)

Prof. Wolin
History 72400
Fall 2023/Monday 6:30 - 8:30

Course Description

“Je ne suis pas Marxiste!”

Karl Marx, 1882

In his “Theses on Feuerbach” (1846) Marx, seeking to free himself from Hegel’s tutelage, famously declared that, “Heretofore, philosophers have only interpreted the world; however, the point is to change it!” At the time, little did Marx realize the immense historical influence his ideas and doctrines would have. For decades to come, Marx’s theories would inspire intellectuals and political activists in Europe, Latin America, and Asia – although, often in ways that would have undoubtedly astonished Marx himself. After all, the first “successful” communist revolution occurred not in a highly industrialized society, as Marx had prophesied, but instead in Tsarist Russia: a nation that had only recently freed its serfs and that was still largely agrarian. Although as late as 1956, Jean-Paul Sartre could still refer to Marxism optimistically as, “The unsurpassable philosophy of our time,” following World War II, with the rising tide of decolonization, the torch of World Revolution had clearly passed (in the words of Franz Fanon) to the “wretched of the earth” – to the denizens of the so-called “Third World.”

To add to this litany of well-known paradoxes: in contemporary China, one of the few remaining communist nations, Marxism has paradoxically become the reigning ideology of a society that is unabashedly oriented toward exponential economic growth and conspicuous consumption. (Or, as Deng Xiaoping proclaimed during the early 1980s: “To get rich is glorious!”) Looking back from 1989 – the watershed year in which the Marxist regimes of Eastern Europe unraveled with breathtaking rapidity – intellectuals and pundits openly wondered whether the time had finally come to write Marxism’s epitaph. However, in light of the rise of neo-liberalism and the prodigious rise of social inequality, forecasts concerning Marxism’s demise would seem premature.

Our primary focus will be the legacy of Marxist thought. As such, we will begin by examining the way in which Marx’s youthful confrontation with Hegel prepared the ground for the development of his notion of “historical materialism.” But very quickly, under the tutelage of the later Engels and the Second International, this conception congealed into a dogmatic body of received truths, precipitating what some have called the “crisis of Marxism.” At the time, one of the main responses to Marxism-in-crisis was “Leninism”: the idea that, since the European proletariat seemed increasingly lethargic, a
vanguard party was required in order to focus its attention on the long-term goal of world revolution.

Under the guise of a “return to Hegel,” and as an antidote to Soviet Marxism, the interwar period witnessed an efflorescence of philosophical Marxism. Among the highlights of this movement were Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* as well as the work of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School – a renewal of Marxist thought that has been largely responsible for the postwar renaissance of “critical Marxism.” More recently, in books such as *Revolution at the Gates*, Slavoj Zizek has encouraged a “return to Lenin.” Similarly, the French Maoist, Alain Badiou, in part inspired by Sartre, has sought to resurrect Marx’s theory of the “subject.” Insisting that, as a critique of capitalism, Marxism has lost none of its historical relevance, Badiou claims that, by learning from its past defeats, Marxism can be resurrected.

### Books Written by Your Instructor Related to These Themes

- *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetic of Redemption*
- *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: the Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism*
- *Herbert Marcuse, Heideggerian Marxism (ed.)*
- *The Frankfurt School Revisited*
- *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution and the Legacy of the 1960s*

### Weekly Assignments:

(Unless otherwise indicated, all readings will be available in PDF format via a Google Drive link)

**August 28: Introduction**

**September 4: Labor Day**

**September 11: Marx’s Confrontation with Hegel and “Left Hegelianism”**  
*The Marx-Engels Reader*, 3-101, 143-145*  
*Kolakowski, Main Currents of Marxism I*, 81-95, 120-146, 177-233*

**September 18: The Marxism of Marx**  
*Marx-Engels Reader*, 146-200, 469-519, 542-548  
*Kolakowski, Main Currents I*, 126-144, 186-191, 200-214,  
Recommended: Bakunin, *God and State*

**September 25: No classes scheduled**

**October 2: Marx as a Political Thinker**  
*Marx-Engels Reader*, 586-652
Furet, *Karl Marx and the French Revolution*, Introduction *
Priestland, *The Red Flag*, Introduction, 1-60
Kolakowski, *Main Currents* I, 146-191, 327-345

October 10: The Critique of Reification (*classes follow a Monday schedule*)
Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (*Marx-Engels Reader*, 319-329) *
Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”* (especially sections 1 and 2)
Weber, “Bureaucracy”*
Merleau-Ponty, “Western Marxism” (*Adventures of the Dialectic*)*
Kolakowski, *Main Currents* III, 253-307*
Recommended: Honneth, *Reification*

October 16: “Cultural Marxism”
Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life”*
Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” “Arcades Exposé”
Adorno, “The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening”*
Jameson, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism”*

October 23: Lenin, the Second International, and the “Crisis of Marxism”
Kolakowski, *Main Currents* II, 1-114, 381-412, 467-528
Lenin, “What is to Be Done”? * “April Theses”; “Revolutionary Social Democracy”*
Luxembourg “The Russian Revolution” *
Lukács, “Bolshevism as a Moral Problem”*
Kautsky, *Terrorism and Communism* *

October 30: The Theory and Practice of Bolshevism
Lenin, “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder”*
Görter, “Response to Lenin” *
Trotsky, *Terrorism and Communism* (w. Introduction by Zizek)
Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism*, 199-245*
Gurian, *Bolshevism*, 163-268*
Pipes, *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, 99-165*

November 6: Marxism and “Eschatology”
Lukács, “1962 Preface” to *Theory of the Novel* *
Bloch, “Karl Marx, Death, and the Apocalypse”* (Spirit of Utopia)
Benjamin, “Politico-Theological Fragment”*; “Critique of Violence”*; “Theses on the Philosophy of History”*
Sorel, “Reflections on Violence”* (*From Georges Sorel*)
Adorno, “Finale,”* *Minima Moralia*
Zizek, Introduction to Robespierre, *Selected Political Writings* *
Kolakowski, *Main Currents* III, 429-449
November 13: *The Left-Wing Critique of Orthodox Marxism*
Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (selection)
Lefort, “What is Bureaucracy?” *
Castoriadis, *The Castoriadis Reader*, 1-195

November 20: *Emancipatory Marxism*
Benjamin, “Surrealism” *
Cohn-Bendit, *Obsolete Communism: the Left-Wing Alternative*, 11-89
Knabb, ed., *The Situationist International Anthology* (selections)*
Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*

November 27: *After the Fall: Debating the Legacy of Communism*
Shearer, “Stalinism” * (from *Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Europe*)
Courtois, ed., *The Black Book of Communism*, Introduction *
Furet, *The Passing of an Illusion* (selection)
Rabinbach, “The Debate over the Black Book of Communism” *
Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*
Kolakowski, *Main Currents III*, 487-530

December 4: *Work on Papers*

December 11: *Conclusion*

December 18: Final paper due

**Written Assignment**: Final Papers – a 12–15-page essay – are due on 18 December. (I provide you with a paper topic or “prompt” mid-way through the semester. The assignment is meant to be an “interpretive essay” rather than a full-blown “research paper.” The essay should demonstrate extensive familiarity with the relevant secondary literature, i.e., the relevant conflict of interpretations. What matters is your capacity to discern and reconstruct the major interpretive standpoints, to evaluate the stronger and weaker arguments and positions, and to arrive at fresh conclusions that, ideally, will advance our understanding of the topic.

**Other Important Texts on Marxism**
Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (3 vols.)
Priestland, *The Red Flag*
Service, *Comrades: A History of World Communism*
Lichtheim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*
Bakunin, *God and State*
Rees, *The Political Thought of Joseph Stalin*
Important Citations As Interpretive Keys to Understanding the History of Marxism

- “We rely on Forms because we lack Principles.”
  M. Robespierre, Speech of January 1793

- “Without, all the tyrants encircle you; within, all the friends of tyranny conspire—
  they will conspire until crime has been robbed of hope. We must smother the
  internal and external enemies of the Republic or perish, in this situation, the first
  maxim of your policy ought to be to lead the people by reason and the people's
  enemies by terror.”
  M. Robespierre, Speech On “Virtue and Terror,” 9 Thermidor, 1794

- “Reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through analyzing the
  mystical consciousness, the consciousness which is unclear to itself, whether it
  appears religious or political form. Then it will transpire that the world has long
  been dreaming of something that it can acquire if only if it becomes conscious of
  it.”
  Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge, 1843
• “The immediate task of philosophy, which is in the service of history is to unmask human self-alienation in its secular form now that it has been masked in its sacred form. Thus the he criticism of heaven is transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics.”

• “The arms of criticism must be replaced by the criticism of arms.”

• “Just as the nations of the ancient world lived their pre-history in their imagination, in mythology, so we Germans have lived out history in thought, in philosophy. We are the philosophical contemporaries of the present day without being its historical contemporaries . . . In politics, the Germans have thought what other nations have done.”

• “A class must be formed which has radical chains, a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society which has a universal character because its sufferings are universal, and which does not claim a particular redress because the wrong which is done to it is not a particular wrong but wrong in general. There must be formed a sphere of society which claims no traditional status but only a human status, a sphere which is not opposed to particular consequences but is totally opposed to all assumptions of the German political system; and, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society, without, therefore, emancipating all these other spheres, which is, in short, a total loss of humanity and which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society, as a particular class, is the proletariat.”

• “The emancipation of Germany will be an emancipation of man. Philosophy is the head of this emancipation and the proletariat is its heart. Philosophy can only be realized by the abolition [Aufhebung] of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realization of philosophy.”

Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction” (1844)

• “Communism as the positive transcendence of private property, or human self-estrangement, and therefore as the real appropriation of the human essence by and for man; communism as the complete return of man to himself as a social (i.e. human) being—a return become conscious, and accomplished within the entire wealth of previous development. This communism, as fully-developed naturalism, equals humanism, and as a fully-developed humanism equals naturalism; it is the genuine resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.”
Marx, “Private Property and Communism” (Paris Manuscripts, 1843-44)

- “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and simply understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties . . . commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because the social character of men’s labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is resented to them as a social reality, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. . . . The existence of the things qua commodities and the value-relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection and have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things.

Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof” (Capital, 1867)

- In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.

Marx, Preface to Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1859)

- “My dialectical method is not only different from the Hegelian, but its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of the Idea, even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought . . . The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is
standing on its head. It must be turned right side up in, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell.”

Marx, Afterward to the Second Edition of *Capital* (1873)

- “In reality, the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another, and indeed in the democratic republic no less than the monarchy; and at best an evil inherited by the proletariat after its victorious struggle for class supremacy, whose worst sides the victorious proletariat, just like the [Paris] Commune, cannot avoid having lop off at once as much as possible until such time as a generation reared in new, free social conditions is able to throw the entire lumber of the state on the scrap heap.

- Of late, the Social-Democratic philistine has once more been filled with wholesome terror at the words: Dictatorship of the Proletariat. Well and good, gentlemen, do you want to know what this dictatorship looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”


- “The movement is everything, the goal, nothing.”

  Eduard Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism* (1898)

- “We said that there could not yet be social democratic consciousness among the workers. This consciousness can only be brought to them from without. The history of countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. it may itself realize the necessity for combining in unions to fight against the employers and to strive to compel the government to pass necessary labor legislation, etc. . . . The organizations of revolutionists must be comprised first and foremost of people whose profession is that of revolutionists . . . That is why I speak of organizations of professional revolutionists . . . Such an organization must of necessity be not too extensive and as secret as possible.”

  V. I. Lenin, “What is to be Done?” (1902)

- “The social democratic movement is the first in the history of class societies which reckons in all its phases . . . on the organization and the direct, independent action of the masses. Because of this the organizational is entirely different from those common in earlier revolutionary movements, such as those of the Jacobins and the adherents of [Auguste] Blanqui. Lenin seems to slight this fact when he presents in *What Is to Be Done* the opinion that the revolutionary social democrat is
nothing else than “a Jacobin indissolubly joined to the organization of the proletariat, which has yet to become conscious of its class interests.”

Rosa Luxemburg, “Leninism or Marxism?” (1903)

- “Bolshevism is the Categorical Imperative with revolver in hand.”

    Ernst Bloch, *Spirit of Utopia* (1918)

- “Socialism = the Soviets + electrification.”

    Lenin (1921)

- “Classical German philosophy . . . is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end – on the plane of philosophy. It is able – in thought – to complete the evolution of class. And – in thought – it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind’s development can at least be seen as a problem.”

    Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923)

- “Il faut pratiquer la poésie.”

    André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1923)

- “The eternal would be the ruffles of a dress rather than an Idea.”

    Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

- (J. Michelet: “Chaque époque rêve la suivante.”) “In the dialectical image, what has been within a particular epoch is always, simultaneously, “what has been from time immemorial.” As such, however, it is manifest, on each occasion, only to a quite specific epoch – namely, the one in which humanity, rubbing its eyes, recognizes just this particular dream image as such. It is at this moment that the historian takes up, with regard to that image, the task of dream interpretation . . .

- Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening; in fact it should treat of nothing else. This one, accordingly, deals with awakening from the nineteenth century.

- The realization of dream elements in awakening is the canon of dialectical thought.”

• The story is told of an automaton constructed in such a way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet’s hand by means of strings. One can imagine a philosophical counterpart to this device. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is to win all the time. It can easily be a match for anyone if it enlists the services of theology, which today, as we know, is wizened and has to keep out of sight.

W. Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)

• The consumer is really worshiping the money he himself has paid for the tickets to a Toscanini concert.”

Adorno, “The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening” (1938)

• “Every time I go to the cinema, I come out the stupider and the worse for it.”

Adorno, Minima Moralia (1951)

• “It is not that chewing gum undermines metaphysics, but that it is metaphysics – that is what must be made clear.”


• “Marxism is unsurpassable philosophy of our time.”

Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason (1960)

• “To kill a European is to kill two birds with one stone: it does away with an oppressor and an oppressed man, and leaves one man dead and one man free.”

Sartre, Preface to Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth (1961)

• “Philosophy lives on today because its moment of realization was missed.”

Adorno, Negative Dialectics (1966)

1. In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.
2. The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation. The specialization of images of the world is completed in the world of the autonomous image, where the liar has lied to himself. The spectacle in general, as the concrete inversion of life, is the autonomous movement of the non-living.

3. The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as instrument of unification. As a part of society it is specifically the sector which concentrates all gazing and all consciousness. Due to the very fact that this sector is separate, it is the common ground of the deceived gaze and of false consciousness, and the unification it achieves is nothing but an official language of generalized separation.

4. The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images.


- “We tried to develop a Critical Theory of society. How were we to know that some people would try to realize it with Molotov cocktails?”

  Adorno, 1968

- “Despotic socialism arose from many historical circumstances, the Marxist tradition among them. The Leninist-Stalinist version of Marxism was no more than a version, i.e. one attempt to put into practice the ideas that Marx expressed in a philosophical form without any clear principles of political interpretation. The view that freedom is measured in the last resort by the degree of unity of society, and that class interests are he only source of social conflict, is one component of the theory. If we consider that there can be a technique of establishing social unity, then despotism is a natural solution to the problem inasmuch as it is the only known technique for the purpose. Perfect unity takes the form of abolishing all institutions of social mediation, including representative democracy and the rule of law as an independent instrument for settling conflicts. The concept of negative freedom presupposes a society of conflict. If this is the same as a class society, and if a class society means society based on private property, then there is nothing reprehensible in the idea that an act of violence which abolishes private property at the same time does away with the need for negative freedom, or freedom tout court.

- “And thus Prometheus awakens from his dream of power, as ignominiously as Gregor Samsa in Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*.”
Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, I