

The Life and Death of Stalinism

Foreword

“In view of the incredibly widespread nature of the distortions of Marxism, our first task is to *restore* the true doctrine of Marx.”

Lenin, *The State and Revolution*

The eyes of the world are on the East. Millions watch with fascination and exhilaration as the “socialist bloc” crumbles. Country after country has been shaken by economic crises, mass struggles for democracy, collapsing governments and popular revolutions. Once-monolithic Communist Parties have discarded long-time leaders, fled the old party names and surrendered governmental positions. Mikhail Gorbachev and Deng Xiaoping, the East’s most powerful leaders, are famed not for their triumphs but for their desperate attempts to overcome the failures of the bureaucratic system. “The Cold War is over and we have won,” proclaim the rulers and theorists of capitalism.

For many, it is not only the Stalinist system but Marxism that has failed, both as an interpretation of modern society and as a guide for revolutionary action. The Marxist goal of communism is seen at best as the ideology of a few well-meaning dreamers and at worst as a euphemism for some of the most oppressive and suffocating societies on earth. Moreover, since the alternative offered by the Gorbachevs and Dengs is to import capitalistic methods that revolutionists once fought to overthrow, revolutionary Marxism seems to have lost all validity.

The answer presented in this book is that *only* Marxism can account for the remarkable turnabout in the Stalinist system. Only Marxism can probe to the roots of what makes these societies function as they do: the struggle between the exploited producing classes and the ruling class. Only Marxism could foresee Stalinism’s inevitable decay. Only Marxism can explain why the reformist Stalinists’ rescue plans will not suffice, why they cannot repair the contradictions at the heart of their system. And Marxism can show as well that the collapse of Stalinism presages a parallel crisis of world capitalism. If the West has won, its triumph will be brief.

This book uses the tools of Marxism to analyze the Stalinist system: the social and economic structure that arose out of the degeneration and defeat of the revolutionary Soviet workers’ state. It demonstrates that Stalinist society is fundamentally capitalist, an integral but subordinate part of international imperialism.

Naturally the rulers of the pseudo-socialist states and their apologists reject any such analysis. But so do most “Marxist” critics of Stalinism. The Stalinist counterrevolution perverted not only the Soviet revolution but Marxism itself. The dialectical method — to study the change and development of society and uncover the essence beneath every surface appearance — has been abandoned. So has the analytic base of Marxism, the critique of political economy that exposes the internal contradictions and the impermanence of capitalism. Thus “Marxism” has been transformed into its opposite, a counterrevolutionary ideology.

To understand Stalinism it is necessary to understand capitalism. For this task it is necessary to

resurrect Marxism in its authentic form as the revolutionary science of the working class, the only agency capable of overthrowing capitalism and thereby creating a world fit for human beings. This book is an important weapon in the effort to revivify the Marxism of Marx, of Lenin, of Luxemburg, of Trotsky, of the thousands of proletarians who have given their lives in the struggle for authentic communism.

The book destroys a whole series of myths that have encrusted Marxism. For example, it rips apart the now commonplace fallacy that the essence of capitalism is competition. As Marx explained, that was the theory of petty capitalists, not his. The book also systematically decimates the fashionable notion that Stalinism, despite its faults, maintained a centralized planned economy. Thus for us Gorbachevism is not an attempt to restore the “democracy” of the market but as a desperate bid to impose discipline and order on an anarchic economy — a bid doomed to failure.

For Marxists the test of theory is practice. The Marxist standpoint and method defended in this book already predicted, over a decade ago, the present devolution of Stalinism in the direction of more traditional capitalist forms. At the height of the Cold War we were able to predict that the dividing line for a future World War III would be drawn between Japan, Germany and the United States rather than between the U.S. and the USSR. When other “theories” treated the Soviet Union as a powerful system, as the wave of the future (for good or for evil), we saw it as weak and collapsing.

The importance of this book, however, does not lie in its predictiveness or in its reconstruction of the true meaning of Marxist categories alone. Its chief contribution is its demolition of so-called Marxists who have reduced Marxist conceptions (the commodity, exploitation, state property, the law of value, the falling rate of profit tendency, planning, accumulation, the productive forces, property relations, property forms, etc.) to technical categories. They have reified and objectified the class and human relationships which for Marx were embodied in these categories. They have turned Marx on his head and accepted bourgeois political economy in his name.

The triumph of pseudo-Marxism did not come through any conspiracy. The victory of Stalinism in the USSR led to the corruption of Communist Parties and “progressive movements” throughout the world. Revolutionary working-class upheavals were chained to the preservation of capitalism under the leadership of class collaborationists. Nationalism replaced internationalism. The authentic Leninists led by Leon Trotsky were murdered or marginalized.

The victory of the Stalinist bureaucracy in the Soviet Union sent a message which jibed with the social attitude of large sections of the middle-class professionals and bureaucrats everywhere. Imperialism, as described by Lenin, had given rise to a labor aristocracy whose viewpoint reflected its material stake in capitalist society. As well, there arose an allied layer, the intelligentsia, which mushroomed especially during the prosperity boom following the Second World War. Dedicated to a radical reform of capitalism, many embraced the “Soviet experiment” when it was safely divorced from proletarian leadership.

The numerous defeats inflicted on the proletariat through the agency of Stalinism (China 1925-27, Germany 1933, Spain 1937, the USSR 1936-39 before the war; East Europe and elsewhere

afterwards) deepened the cynicism of the intelligentsia toward the possibility of proletarian revolution — not only among pro-Stalinists but among their opponents on the left too. The “God that Failed” was not just the USSR but the working class as well. Workers were recognized not for their social power but for their numbers; like peasants, they could be manipulated “for their own good.” Their salvation was the bright man’s burden, the task of “servants of the people,” of social engineers. Marxism as the science of human self-liberation was gutted.

This book convincingly shows that the present collapse of Stalinism is intricately linked to the underlying crisis now facing world capitalism as a whole. Not by accident, the numbers and strength of the middle strata are also eroding. At the same time, the working masses are rising across the “East” and the “South.” Soon they will move in the North and West as well. As the revolution develops the workers will demonstrate not only their enormous social power but their growing revolutionary consciousness as well. They are in the process of re-creating their own class leadership — their own vanguard parties and International, the embodiment of their advanced consciousness. This book is one element in that process.

Once again the working class will pronounce its contempt for the “condescending saviors” who really work to save capitalism, knowingly or not. Once again the working class is coming to recognize itself as the inheritor of the entire history of humanity’s struggle for a better world. Capitalism, through the bestial means natural to it, has created the social and technical basis for future abundance. Under the leadership of the working class, humanity will be able to rid itself of problems now unnecessary and idiotic — starvation, war, exploitation, racism, sexism, chauvinism and human degradation in all its forms.

The Marxism of this book is the Marxism of those whom today’s “Marxists” have dismissed as utopian and naive. It embodies the belief that the workers will be motivated to produce abundance not by the whiplash of the market but by a common consciousness of their common ability to build a human, egalitarian world in which creativity and culture can flourish, in which “Humanity the Maker” can reach for the stars.

Can working people today achieve this destiny? Not as they are, but as they will be when in the course of making the socialist revolution they fit themselves for such deeds. This is a sophisticated book written to help destroy the sophisticated cynicism about human capacity that plagues our age. It is written in defense of the intellect and in class defiance of those who in their arrogance have misappropriated the liberating power of ideas.

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