

### **Marxism after Marxism**

Imre Szeman

*From Marxism to Post Marxism?* by Göran Therborn. New York: Verso, 2008, 208 pp., US\$23.95, ISBN 1844671887.

What comes next for Marxism? This is the question animating Göran Therborn's *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?*, which considers the future of Marxist theory in the context of the new political, economic, and social circumstances of the twenty-first century. Perhaps more than any other theoretical tradition, Marxism has been especially attentive to the circumstances in which it operates; a meta-awareness of its own conditions of possibility is an essential characteristic for a mode of thought in which history plays a constitutive role and ideas are of necessity anchored in the stuff of life. Marxism originated and developed in circumstances starkly different than our own. In what ways has it changed or does it need to change to remain relevant in this new era?

I had imagined that this book would address this question through an extension and expansion of Therborn's insightful "After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World," which appeared in the January-February 2007 issue of *New Left Review*. The hoped for broad and systematic overview of Marxism's theoretical legacies and its status in the new millennium is not exactly what one finds here. Instead, the book consists of three variations on a theme. Each of the chapters has been previously published: the first in *New Left Review* in 2001, the second in the edited collection *Companion to Social Theory* (Blackwell, 1996), and the third in *The Handbook on European Social Theory* (Routledge, 2006) before appearing in *NLR* 43 as the overview on post-communist social theory mentioned above. While not covering the exact same ground, they also don't

quite add up to a whole: each retains traces of its origin as something akin to an encyclopedia entry or review essay, offering overviews of where we stand from slightly different vantage points. This isn't meant as a criticism. Therborn's enviable familiarity with debates and discussions in twentieth-century Marxism makes this book a valuable guide for thinking about the possibilities and challenges facing Marxism at the present. The five-year gaps between chapters function as a useful index of changes in Marxist perspectives (if in a foreshortened way) on recent developments as they have unfolded — from the end of the Soviet Union to the empirical and theoretical challenges of globalization and the post-global era we are now entering.<sup>1</sup>

"Into the Twenty-First Century: The New Parameters of Global Politics," the book's first chapter, presents a survey of geopolitical circumstances (circa 2001) with an eye on the future possibilities of a Left whose political fortunes seem to be in doubt. Like many leftists writing about globalization, Therborn's aim is in part to offer a sober corrective to widely-circulated claims about the shape of the present — claims which rapidly came to shape the social imaginary about the nature of life under globalization. While the United States remains a dominant world power, geopolitics is far from being unipolar; despite the increase in numbers of interstate actors, the state remains the most significant political force; and (perhaps surprisingly) corporations have not grown as fast as the GDP of core economies, even if they seem more powerful than previously. Some of these points feel dated, especially in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. The disavowal of the nation, for instance, has been challenged by numerous critics of globalization discourse, and the collapse of the U.S. economy means that multipolarity is the name of the game for the foreseeable future. However, other points that Therborn develops in his wide-ranging assessment of global politics are valuable and deserve to be discussed further. The first has to do with the decline of class politics and the rise in its place of a generalized social irreverence. These are not linked phenomena, or even developments occurring on the same level, but significant changes nevertheless which give new texture to contemporary social life and to which the Left must pay attention. In Therborn's opinion, the epoch of the industrial working-class — never a truly global phenomenon even at its European height — is definitively over, never to return. De-agrarianization and social modernization have together brought about an erosion of traditional forms of deference based on political authority, gender, caste and class, and other forms of social privilege. This has the potential to produce "new forms of rebellious collectivism" (20), but has also expressed itself in new forms of authoritarianism, fundamentalism and xenophobia. For Therborn, "the new capitalist vigour, and the situation of less class and more irreverence, calls for something that goes beyond

attention to 'new social movements'" (60). He ends the chapter with a call to the Left to start thinking from a trans-socialist perspective:

Trans-socialism is a perspective of social transformation going beyond the strategies and historical institutions of socialism, the centrality of the working-class and the agency of the labour movement, of public ownership and large-scale collective planning of production. It is not 'postsocialist', because it does not imply an acceptance of capitalism as the only possible game and because it implies a rejection neither of the goals of historical socialism nor of the attempts to 'build' it. On the contrary, it starts from an acceptance of the historical legitimacy of the vast socialist movement and its heroic epic of creativity and enthusiasm, of endurance and struggle, of beautiful dreams and hopes as well as of blunders, failures and disillusion — in short, of defeats as well as victories. It retains the fundamental Marxian idea that human emancipation from exploitation, oppression, discrimination and the inevitable linkage between privilege and misery can come from struggle by the exploited and disadvantaged themselves. It then continues by recognizing that the twenty-first century is beginning to look very different from the twentieth — not more equal and just, but with new constellations of power and new possibilities of resistance. (61)

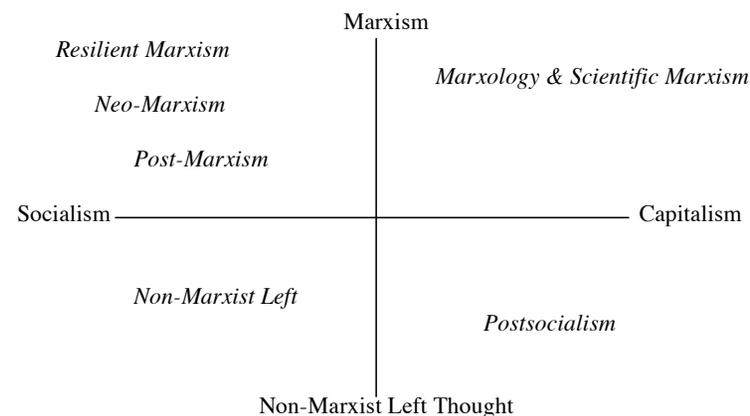
This insistence on the need to face up to the new and give up on the comforts of the old is at the heart of all three essays in the book. Whether this represents a shift from Marxism to something meaningfully described as post-Marxism is left open.

"Twentieth-Century Marxism and the Dialectics of Modernity" investigates the lasting significance of critical theory in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. As he does throughout the book, Therborn links Marxism with the project of modernity. "Marxism defended modernity with a view to creating another, more fully developed modernity" (67), he writes. The critical theory of the Frankfurt School lies at the heart of the exploration of the dialectics of modernity. The core of the chapter consists of Therborn's insightful attempt to defend the achievements of critical theory and Western Marxism more generally against claims that its philosophical achievements came at the cost of a political defeat: a shift from the barricades to the classroom, from politics to theory. This is, of course, the view of Western Marxism offered up by Perry Anderson, though Therborn notes similar constructions in the work of Martin Jay and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.<sup>2</sup> He offers a strikingly different account of Western Marxism, which he reminds us was never a true group in the manner of the Frankfurt School but a *post*

*hoc* reconstruction intended to capture broad tendencies in the diverse work of a generation of thinkers. It is political victory and not defeat which animates this work: for the generation of Left thinkers who started to write after World War I, the October Revolution was seen “as a decisive, world-historical event” (91), one which required considerable political and philosophical reflection to connect to the main line of modernity in the rest of the Europe. Anderson sees the failure for the revolution to occur elsewhere as a reason for a retreat into theory. Therborn argues that “the main function of the 1960s Western Marxism” — the era in which it comes to fullest fruition — “was to open up an intellectual horizon and a field of reflection, where theoretical and conceptual issues could be discussed without being foreclosed by party-line polemics or divisive political loyalties” (90-91). What Anderson views as defeat, Therborn reads as the possibility of thinking outside of party limits, which allowed critical theory to bring out and develop fully “the problematic of Marxism as a dialectic of modernity” (109). He also criticizes Anderson for failing to consider the theoretical work of feminists, labour movements, and the anticolonial struggle. Anderson considers only philosophers, because “philosophers were very prevalent in 1917, and latter-day Marxists have wanted to listen to philosophers” (92) — the idea of Western Marxism being about defeat thus takes on the character of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

While the second chapter considers developments in Marxist thought from 1917-1991 (the death of Henri Lefebvre acting as the endpoint of Western Marxism for Therborn), the final chapter, “After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in the North at the Dawn of the Twenty-First Century,” takes us from 1989 to the present. The change in subtitle from the *NLR* version points to a change in perspective: a present no longer defined by the dusk of an older moment but by the dawning of something new. Here again, Therborn insists on the need to see Marxism as part of the drama of modernity and proposes that it be seen as constituted out of three nodes which produce a conceptual triangle: historical social science, a philosophy of dialectics, and politics. In the wake of the disaster of neoliberalism, this triangle “has been broken — in all likelihood, irremediably” (119). The bulk of the chapter is catalog of Left social theory over the past two decades. The names Therborn discusses are familiar ones for the most part — Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Fredric Jameson, David Harvey, Giovanni Arrighi, Immanuel Wallerstein, Étienne Balibar, Judith Butler, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Manuel Castells — and his stocktaking of successes and failures is not unexpected (he views the lay of the land with a sociologist’s eye), though even the task of providing such a survey is productive and helpful.

More compelling is the conceptual grid of left-theoretical positions he provides at the end of the chapter:



At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Marxism is characterized by a sharp divide between theory and politics. Therborn notes that the North American Left can be found on the left side of the center line, while the European Left is more to the right — a surprising claim, perhaps, though he reminds us that there is no equivalent in Europe of figures like Noam Chomsky or Mike Davis. The bottom right quadrant is occupied by Third Wayers such as Anthony Giddens and Ulrich Beck (a slightly unfair characterization in the latter case). The bottom left is relatively empty — “there has been little radical programmatic thinking in social democracy anywhere since the ambitious but politically ill-fated wage-earner-funds proposal by the Swedish blue-collar unions” (162) — although Therborn also places the work of Robert Mangabeira Unger and the activity of the World Social Forums there. The top right quadrant is also relatively empty; works like Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993) and Terrell Carver’s *The Postmodern Marx* (1998) belong there, both making use of Marx without connecting their analyses to any form of anti-capitalist political practice.

This leaves the top left quadrant as the site of real action — despite a general lack of attention to an elaboration of socialist alternatives. *Post-Marxism* refers to “writers with an explicitly Marxist background, whose recent work has gone beyond Marxist problematics and who do not publicly claim a continuing Marxist commitment” (165). In this group, Therborn names Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth,

Manuel Castells, Régis Debray, and Zygmunt Bauman. *Neo-Marxism* includes the work of Slavoj Žižek and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. This group is largely comprised of political philosophy or cultural analysis which avoids the necessary hard slog through the muck and mire of social analysis. Finally, there is the category of *Resilient Marxism*, a kind of catch-all slot into which Therborn places the work of Marxist journals (*New Left Review*, *Das Argument*, *Prokla*, etc.), encyclopedia projects (Wolfgang Fritz Haug and Frigga Haug's fifteen-volume *Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis's *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, etc.), and lesser-known writings by Daniel Bensaïd, Alex Callinicos, Michael Burawoy, and Erik Olin Wright. This grid is not meant to name winners or losers (though the upper left is of course of most interest to Therborn) but to identify the modes of Left thought at the outset of the twenty-first century. "The existing repertoire of positions is unlikely to please everyone, but it does nevertheless include rallying points for nearly everybody on the left" (179), and despite the oft-repeated claim about Left impotence and political frustrations, Therborn reminds us that there is far more Left intellectual production at present than forty or fifty years ago.

Have we moved from Marxism to post-Marxism? The title is posed as a question; the book leaves little doubt about the necessity of such a move, whether it has actually happened as yet. "Post-Marxism" need not be seen as abandonment of the insights of Marx and the Marxist tradition into the operations of capitalism or the ongoing dialectic of modernity, so much as a shift from older historical problematics to a direct confrontation with our bad new days. As the book makes clear, this is already happening. *From Marxism to Post-Marxism?* is less a rallying cry for new approaches and for braving theoretical and political paths not taken, than a ground-clearing exercise that might allow Left thought to better understand its past, present, and future. Therborn writes that the book makes "no claim to being an intellectual history or a history of ideas, and may be seen rather as a traveller's notebook, unpretentious notes jotted down after a long, arduous journey through the climb, passes, descents and dead ends of twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Marxism" (x). One could not hope for a better guide for the arduous journey still to come.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Post-global? At least insofar as globalization was the name for an ideological project — neoliberalism — we have now moved onto new territory. This has been pronounced by none other than Robert Kagan, who has recently reversed Francis Fukuyama's infamous claim about the end of history. If it was once imagined that history had come to an end with the establishment of a "new kind of international order, with nation-states growing together or disappearing, ideological conflicts melting away, cultures intermingling, and increasing free commerce and communications" (3), Kagan insists that history has now returned in the form of international competition among nation-states. The developments of the past twenty years have proven wrong the assumption that economic liberalization leads to political liberalization, as well as the "abiding belief in the inevitability of human progress, the belief that history moves in only one direction" (5). Only the right would find this surprising. See Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*. New York: Knopf, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. Joseph Bien (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).