Marxism after Marxism
Imre Szeman


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
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 not 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 failures, failures and disillusionments — 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. 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-

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 failures, failures and disillusionments — 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)

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

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marxism</th>
<th>Marxology &amp; Scientific Marxism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neo-Marxism</td>
<td>Post-Marxism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialism</td>
<td>Capitalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Marxist Left</td>
<td>Postsocialism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Non-Marxist Left Thought

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 Gidden 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 slogging 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 problematicis 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
1 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.