COMMUNISM, SOCIALISM, MARXISM, BOLSHEVISM

Communism is first and foremost the reality of long-dismantled or nearly defunct regimes in China, the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Cuba, and North Korea: all notionally egalitarian societies. In the first half of the twentieth century, communist parties established dictatorial regimes that enforced, in the name of socialist goals, the ostentatious equality but de facto impoverishment of whole societies over decades of political rule, to the sole benefit of party elites. The previous social order (usually a type of primitive capitalism with feudal remnants in what were largely agricultural economies) had been overturned through a combination of political ruthlessness, violence, and genuine popular support. Everywhere, far-Left movements, long active but usually illegal, took advantage of favorable geopolitical circumstances to gain power. The first to succeed were the Bolsheviks, who orchestrated the October Revolution (1917) and did away with tsarist Russia during World War I. Led by Vladimir Lenin, they established the archetypal communist party-state, whose totalitarian grip on society, cemented in the 1930s under Stalin, is comparable only to that of Nazi Germany. Later, communists in Eastern Europe gained sudden prominence in the aftermath of World War Two with the military backing of the victorious Red Army, and secured the monopoly of local power at the price of becoming satellite states in the orb of the USSR. In China, Mao Zedong led the communist revolution in the 1920s and 1930s—essentially a peasant revolt deployed first against the nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), a rival army led by Chiang Kai-shek, and later allied with the KMT against the Japanese—and became chief of state in the People’s Republic in 1949. Chinese communism, modeled on the Soviet regime, achieved the same terrifying results as had Lenin and Stalin in Russia, on an even bigger scale.

To the peoples in question, communism, the higher octave of socialism (the two terms are often used interchangeably in this context), was depicted concomitantly as a historical inevitability and as a noble mission the people undertook with party guidance. It required massive sacrifices, which citizens soon performed voluntarily, under moral coercion or at gunpoint: rural collectivization, rapid urbanization, and forced industrialization. Communism thus conceived also required the systematic liquidation of “the enemies of the people”: any category deemed, for whatever reason, to hinder the project, from rich peasants and former owners of factories (now nationalized) to unregimented artists and intellectuals. The party controlled the economy, the defense, the education, and the media. It regulated all aspects of people’s lives, from the most public (holidays and festivals) to the most private (pro-natal policies). It banned other parties, civil associations, organizations, and in time closed down all avenues of dissent, precluding the possibility of opposition. Sparse pockets of armed resistance had been crushed in the early years. Spied on by an octopus-like secret police, the population complied; moral resistance, where it had not been vanquished by state propaganda, morphed into general apathy and civic disaffection. Thus Communism, like Nazism, fully manifested the malignity of totalitarianism: it simultaneously crushed individual liberties and tainted the idea of collective action.

While the practice of communism is indelibly associated with totalitarian states, the *idea* of communism is a timeless, humanist, wide-ranging reaction against the system of private property, which inevitably entails social injustice and political heteronomy. Communism advocates collective ownership of property as a prerequisite of equality; socialism merely insists on a degree of income redistribution to even out the odds. Sometimes envisioned as the original, blissful state of humankind, sometimes as its future destination, universal brotherhood is a staple of the political imagination. During antiquity, Epicurean precepts and Christian teachings alike spoke for equality. Plato had explored the issue in *The Republic* (380 BC). A millennium later, Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516)portrayed in detail an egalitarian society. In 1789, the speculative notion that privilege can be willfully eradicated became a stark reality during the French Revolution, with its intransigent enactment of *Liberty, Equality,* and *Fraternity*. This rapidly apotheosized event became the impetus and template for two centuries of radical politics worldwide, licensing a wide spectrum of choices. The French Revolution’s two primary political offspring were a spate of nationalist revolutions against the old empires, for example in Greece, Italy, Ireland, Serbia, Turkey, China, and across South America; and the spread of socialist-communist revolutionary movements throughout Europe. In the latter case, the French Revolution spurred not just utopian, short-lived, libertarian communes, and eventually state communism with its genocidal experiments, but also moderate, peaceful, and enduring socialist (or social-democratic) collective action, central to parliamentary politics everywhere and genuinely emancipatory. In the democratic West, the socialist movement helped bring about decisive social and political gains in the twentieth century, from workers’ benefits to universal suffrage and minorities’ rights, while communism competed with fascist proclivities between the wars, often in open street conflict during Germany’s Weimar Republic, and emerged a political victor in Europe after the defeat of Nazism in 1945. Today, social-democratic Scandinavia is generally seen as a model of prosperity and good citizenship.

The French Revolution had illustrated not one, but two archetypal versions of socialism: from above, under the aegis of a revolutionary party, and from below, such as the spontaneous popular movement of the *sans-culottes*. A century later, the modernist era showcases the tension between these two powerful traditions, exemplified by the Bolshevik revolution (1917) and the Paris Commune (1870), respectively. The *First International* (1864), an association of the industrial proletariat worldwide, had entertained in its ranks both ideas: political action by the centralized state as well as economic action emanating from the workers themselves. Gracchus Babeuf in the French Revolution, Saint-Simon (the father of socialized industrialism and technocratic organization) in the 1830s, and Auguste Blanqui around 1848 had upheld the former: a conspiracy communism leading to a revolutionary coup d’etat. The political avant-garde was designed to grab power, then lead the way towards a new, egalitarian society via the dictatorship of proletariat (little was made of universal suffrage). Socialism from below, known by the time of the *First International* as anarcho-syndicalism, shares with raw anarchism an antipathy towards the state, even (or especially) a welfare state. But instead of unbridled freedom, it advocates the workers’ orderly emancipation through their own initiative in a federative setting not devoid of pluralism. It found inspiration in Robert Owen’s cooperatives, Charles Fourier’s phalansteries, and in the mutualism of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, who criticized both private property and centralized collectivism, while retaining some pragmatic form of religion under the heading of “methodical atheism.” Practical imperatives sharpened the tension between the two socialisms in the *International*, whose mastermind, Karl Marx, had his rival Bakunin excluded from the organization at the Hague Congress (1872). Anarchism was being sidelined to consolidate the state-oriented strategy that Marx deemed more likely to succeed, given the sobering outcome of the Paris Commune, which had been suppressed by the military and a conservative backlash. The *Second International* (1889) sealed the triumph of state socialism, and the schism was made permanent at the Congress of London in 1896. Yet revolutionary anarcho-syndicalism remained a strong presence on the Left for two decades, particularly in France where it found a charismatic doctrinaire in Georges Sorel and solid institutional support in the Confédération Générale du Travail. Syndicalists favored general strike as a political weapon, unlike the reformist and pacifist Socialist Party led at first by Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue and later by Jean Jaurès and Georges Clemenceau. But a new opposition soon eclipsed the old one. After the Red October of 1917—the first successful communist revolution and as such an instant model—a *Third International* (1919) set apart the Bolshevik communists, devoted to proletarian centralism, from both “deviant” Trotskyites (adepts of the original soviets, who denounced the hijacking of the Russian Revolution by a bureaucratic apparatus and formed their own *Fourth International*) and mere socialists. In France, a Communist Party split from the Socialist Party at the Tours Congress (1920); Italy soon followed. The new communist parties made no secret of their allegiance to the Soviet Union. In the west, however, Communists and also Socialists, though nominally revolutionary, were long inured to parliamentary procedure and aimed at best for reform. Meanwhile, socialism in Great Britain remained isolated, mild, and paternalistic: a bourgeois hobby, as illustrated by the (non-Marxist) Fabian Society created in 1884. By contrast, the Central European Left revolved around the massive Social Democratic Party in Germany, the largest workers’ party on the continent. But in opposition to its stifling orthodoxy, there arose again a type of socialism from below, stressing direct action and the primacy of revolutionary mass consciousness over material relations of production. Adumbrated by Rosa Luxemburg and praised by Georg Lukács, council communism was fully theorized by Anton Pannekoek. Endemic in Hungarian, Italian, Austrian and German factories between 1917-1921, workers’ councils all but disappeared in the 1930s, then reappeared in the anti-totalitarian insurrection in Budapest (1956), sparking the vogue of *autogestionnaire* socialism, or self-management, in the 1960s.

Radical politics in the modern era in any guise is inseparable from Marxism. Karl Marx (1818-1883) brought together in an unprecedented synthesis an agenda for mankind’s social progress, a science of political economy, and a philosophy of history. From the *Communist Manifesto* (1844) and *The German Ideology* (1846) to the *Inaugural Address* of the First International (1864) and the economistic summa of his late years, *Capital* (1867-1893), his work became *the* ideological corpus of the Left and an arch-reference for future radicals. Marx, a German Jew who lived in France and England, is arguably the most important social thinker of the nineteenth century, and he had an immeasurable influence on the twentieth. Against the intellectual background of German idealism, philosophic radicalism, and early socialism that defined his youth, Marx crystallized between 1840 and 1848 the tenets of a new, materialist critique of society claiming to make the logic of history manifest and revolutionary doctrine self-evident. Class struggle, although ideologically camouflaged, defines social reality. For Marx, the critique of ideology had to be matched with the appropriation of the means of production by workers. In the march of history, he argued, proletarian revolution would inexorably complete and supersede the bourgeois revolution that had occurred in 1789. For the next thirty years, his titanic work both shaped and reflected the reality of the growing labor movement with its wider circumstances: the German question, the entwined issues of nationalism and democracy in Europe, the Paris Commune and its bitter lessons.

Marx’s weighty oeuvre has prompted breathless debate: the contradictions (or contrasting stages) in his thought informed the rich and conflicted Marxian posterity. Although favorable to state socialism, Marx underlined that emancipation must be the workers’ own. Although partial to the vanguard concept, he promoted an openly revolutionary party instead of scattered confidential cells. As he described and prescribed social change, material determinism slowly clouded over the historical agency unique to the “universal class” that is the industrial proletariat. Finally, the subversive Red Prussian conceded eventually that labor’s conquest of power was only part of the larger struggle for democracy, which was the main issue of the modernist era.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a positivistic, simplified version of dialectical materialism, shaped more by Engels than by Marx, had prevailed as the official platform of socialist parties across Europe. This orthodoxy (widely popularized by Kautsky, Mehring, and Plekhanov) itself came under attack before World War One. From the right, revisionists dared dismiss revolution: Eduard Bernstein favored instead strategic alliances to achieve gradual reforms. From the left, radicals like Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg (adversaries in their preference for party centralism and popular spontaneity, respectively) insisted on actual revolution: true upheaval was needed to remold society. Lenin’s success, however short-lived, reshaped the debate: the Soviet Union, a true and unprecedented ideocracy, claimed a monopoly on the communist doctrine. Yet Bolshevism in action was not only an all too literal dictatorship (of the party, not the proletariat), but also a pragmatic commitment to political success that put tactical considerations above intellectual (and indeed any other) scruples. In response, Left-wing intellectuals of the interwar years sought alternatives to the ossified Marxism-Leninism instated as the dogma of communist parties all over the world. Many embraced the “young Marx” of the newly discovered 1844 *Manuscripts*, emphasizing its Hegelian themes of freedom and alienation. The “old Marx” of *Capital* was caricatured as overly deterministic and naïve in his economic prognoses, largely refuted since. This insistence on class-consciousness (Lukács), organic intellectuals and cultural hegemony (Gramsci), or negative dialectics (Adorno), is typical of Western Marxism: a neo- (later post-) Hegelian reaction whose seminal two waves correspond to the two postwar eras. Thus Marxism memorably, if unwittingly, underwrote both twentieth-century totalitarian excess and its enlightened critique by the intellectual Left, along with concrete advances towards a more just society.

*Bibliography*

Perry Anderson, *Considerations on* *Western Marxism* (1977)

Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (1996)

Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (3rd edition, 2008)

Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (2009)

Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy* (1995)

David McLellan, *Marxism after Marx* (4th edition, 2007)

*The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (1999)

Georgiana Perlea

New York University