

June 19, 2013

A Theory Without a Movement, a Hope Without a Name: The Future of Marxism in a Post-Marxist World

Justin Schwartz

A THEORY WITHOUT A MOVEMENT, A HOPE WITHOUT A NAME: The Future of Marxism in a Post-Marxist World

Justin Schwartz*
Chicago, Illinois

“If anything is certain, it is that I am not a Marxist!”
— Karl Marx to Paul Lafargue

I. Introduction: Does “Marxism” Matter Any More?

Lenin once said that the theory of Karl Marx “is all-powerful because it is true.”¹ Largely true it may be, but no one would mistake it for all-powerful today. Whatever specter is haunting Europe or elsewhere today does not bear the name “Marxism” that it did for perhaps half of the last century and a half. Of course, it’s no secret that Marxism has been in “crisis” for quite some time, as attested to by the plethora of books and articles pairing those terms for more than a generation. Since the dust has settled from the fall of Soviet Communism, moreover, the worry has grown that Marxism is an idea with a great past ahead of it.

My question is: even if Marxism as a theory is true, or true enough, what’s the point of identifying as Marxist at this juncture, after the wrack of virtually all large-scale workers’ movements that identified themselves as Marxist? Is this just a kind of sentimental self-indulgence, an attachment to red flags, hammers and sickles, and other symbols of a dead religion that people who are serious about radical social change should outgrow? To be quite clear, I do not here offer another “God that failed” renunciation of socialism or world-weary reconciliation with reality. If Marx’s ideas have as much validity as they seem to, indeed if the

* Justin Schwartz is a Chicago attorney who is active with the National Lawyers Guild. He has published

¹ V.I. Lenin, “The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism,” in *Selected Works in Three Volumes*, vol. 1. (Moscow: Progress Publishers (1970)) (1913), p. 66.

historical record of our times and before shows anything, resistance to depredations of the increasingly small and increasingly rich upper classes will persist, perhaps escalate, and in time and *with time*, I am confident, prevail.² The concern I have is rather that the collapse of Marxism as a movement may make continued self-identification as Marxists an obstacle to the realization of the goals those movements have had.

We can approach the issue by considering David Schweickart's *Against Capitalism*,³ a defense of democratic market socialism that I regard as the most significant work of socialist theory of the 1990s. I agree with almost everything Schweickart says, but my concern is with how the view is characterized. After avoiding the term "Marxism" for over 300 pages, Schweickart comes out in the final chapter of the book as some sort of Marxist. He even contends, I think most implausibly, that his market socialist model can be identified with Marx's "higher phase of communism."⁴ Many self-described Marxists would disagree that he is any sort of a Marxist. They would argue that Marxism means getting beyond markets; that Schweickart's market socialism is more like J.S. Mill's Proudhon's and other targets of Marx's own criticisms; that Schweickart's project of envisaging a feasible alternative violates Marx's strictures against writing recipes for the cookshops of the future. Still, setting aside whether Marx's communism is compatible with markets, a point on which I agree with the orthodox Marxists that it is not, Schweickart's ideas have respectable Marxist antecedents in the self-management of Tito's

² See my "Relativism, Reflective Equilibrium, and Justice," *Legal Studies* 17/1 (1997), pp. 128-168. In this paper I argue, among other things, for a rather old-fashioned view of history as progressive. This is not traditional Marxist inevitabilism of the stagist variety. I say "given time" because, in view of global warming and other threats to the survival of the human race or a civilization that could support emancipation, I believe we have a short, although somewhat unspecific deadline.

³ David Schweickart, *Against Capitalism*. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1993) (now published by Westview).

Yugoslavia, and affinities to Gorbachev's perestroika and Lenin's New Economic Policy. There is a sense in which it doesn't matter — if Schweickart had said instead, "Of course this isn't Marxism," that would not affect whether he had a plausible alternative to capitalism. And there are advocates of economic democracy like Michael Walzer who say just this. They broadly agree with Schweickart about the shape of a desirable society but don't see the point of being Marxists.⁵ But this only sharpens the question. What's the point of saying, as Schweickart does, "And, oh yes, I'm a Marxist," if it doesn't matter?

The writers who have discussed the fate of Marxism in a post-Communist world do not seem to have addressed my concern here. What they generally do is to argue that Marxism is not theoretically refuted by historical developments, internal inconsistencies, or analytical failings. In *The Revenge of History*, Alex Callinicos distinguishes Marxism from Stalinism, and suggests that as a "powerful, historically oriented social theory"; Marxism, he says, has "demonstrated its intellectual vitality." He acknowledges that Marxism is also a "political project for human emancipation,"⁶ but there is nothing in his book that would suggest that a political, as opposed to an intellectual, project under that name is still viable. In *Whose Millennium? Theirs or Ours?*, Daniel Singer contends that radical movements have not stopped any more than has oppression and exploitation, pointing to the antiglobalization movements manifested, for example, in the French Winter of Discontent of 1995-96,⁷ but he does not talk about the fate of a self-identified

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 343.

⁵ Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*. (New York: Basic Books 1983).

⁶ Alex Callinicos, *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the Eastern European Revolutions*. (University Park, Penn., Penn State Univ. Press, 1991), p. 17.

⁷ Daniel Singer, *Whose Millennium?: Theirs or Ours?* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), pp. 129-47.

Marxist movement. In *Reinventing Marxism*, Howard Sherman only argues that a credible version of the theory can be reconstructed,⁸ something I would not dispute, whatever the merits of Sherman's particular reconstruction.

So it is fairly novel to say, as I do here, let's grant all that, and but this still leaves open the question of the point of a Marxist identification today. Unlike, say, Ron Aronson, who insists that "Marxism is over,"⁹ I am not arguing for the proposition that there is no point. I am asking a question, not maintaining a thesis. To avoid misunderstanding, I will explain some things I do not mean by pressing this question.

II. Five Red Herrings

First, I do not mean that Francis Fukayama was right that liberal democratic capitalism is the end of history, that there is no possible alternative social arrangement that would also be better than what we have.¹⁰ Far from it. Schweickart, for one, has set forth a better alternative to capitalism, if not to liberal democracy (he does not purport to offer an alternative to liberal democracy, which he supports) and whether or not this is Marx's free association of producers, it would be worth fighting for. For those who still hold out for nonmarket alternatives, advocates of these have devoted, in a most unMarxist way, serious thought to showing their theoretical feasibility.¹¹ Ralph Miliband, who at the end of his life seems to have ended up near the position

⁸ See Howard J. Sherman, *Reinventing Marxism*. (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press 1995).

⁹ Ronald Aronson, *After Marxism*. (New York: Guilford Press 1995), p. 1.

¹⁰ Francis Fukayama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: Avon Books 1992), p. 51. At this point, the "liberal democratic" elements in capitalism, always fragile and relatively recent, are fading in the face of the national security state, and capitalism itself is taking a new, terrible form as neoliberalism, offering deregulated markets for the largest corporations and banks, backed with guarantees of publically funded bailouts when the inevitable and increasingly severe meltdowns occur.

¹¹ Some of the main nonmarket alternatives were surveyed by their advocates in the special issue of

I am discussing here, insisted — we may hope correctly — that socialism remains on the agenda, although he thought that Marxism is neither less nor more than “a major point of reference in the discussion of socialism.”¹²

Second, I do not think that countersystemic movements are now totally and permanently marginalized, that there will be no large scale, effective, radical resistance to the rule of capital. Even Fukayama acknowledges that there will be future “attempts to find such alternatives from the left.”¹³ The antiglobalization movements that went under the rubric of “Seattle” at the turn of the century, under the slogan “A Different World Is Possible”; and those that have emerged under the post-capitalist crisis of 2007-09 names of “Occupy Wall Street (or Occupy Whatever), and similar movements, show that we will not have to wait for the future for these movements to materialize, even if they have been dealt a setback by the tragic events of 9/11 and their illiberal aftermath promoted by Republicans and Democrats in the U.S. As I write today (mid 2013), Greece, Cyprus, and Turkey are in open revolt against neoliberal austerity programs; Palestinians continue to mount a heroic resistance to the Israeli occupation (if one marred by rocket attacks), the left-wing but nonMarxist Venezualian government, democratically elected four times under Hugo Chavez, remains in power along with a number of other left-wing governments in Northern South America, and United States’ invasion and occupation of Iraq, which before its

Science & Society 66/1 (Spring 2002) (“Building Socialism Theoretically: Alternatives to Capitalism and the Invisible Hand”). Michael Albert & Robin Hahnel have been developing their nonmarket utopian Parecon (participatory economics) model for almost a quarter century. *Se, e.g. The Political Economy of Participatory Economics* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 1991); <http://www.zcommunications.org/topics/parecon> (an ongoing participatory blog on the subject); Paul Cockshott & Allin Cottrell, *Towards a New Socialism* (Nottingham, UK: Spokesman 1993), available at http://ricardo.ecn.wfu.edu/~cottrell/socialism_book/.

¹² Ralph Miliband, *Socialism for a Sceptical Age*. (London: Verso 1994), p. 5.

¹³ Fukayama, *End of History*, p. 299.

inception, called into being a vast international antiwar movement the likes of which were not seen, in the case of Vietnam, until that war had escalated to major conflict, seems to have ended, along with its occupation of Afghanistan, in defeat and failure, although at the hands of forces that are the very opposite of anything left.

Third, I do not argue that we should flee from the term “socialism.” (“Just don’t *call it that!*”). The term “communism” *may* be, as I expect, hopelessly poisoned by association with Stalinism, and, although I do not argue the point here, I doubt that Marx’s nonmarket communism would be feasible even if the *term* could be rescued for political purposes. Outside the United States, “socialism” is still respectable (maybe too respectable), and even within this country it hardly marks one as further out on the loony fringe than “liberal,” a term abandoned by the mainstream Democratic Party, which, outside of Massachusetts and a handful of urban centers and college towns, consists, as far as its elected face goes, largely of “moderates,” conservatives, and neoliberals whose positions are to the right of an Eisenhower Republican’s.

I do not suggest that the term “socialism” be retained for sentimental reasons or as shibboleth to blazon one’s radicalism to world. Rather, there would be no point to abandoning it, because whatever hardline pro-planning Marxists would call even a market alternative to capitalism like Schweickart’s economic democracy, there is no question what the *capitalists* and their defenders would call any proposal that, like Schweickart’s, would require their property to be taken by the workers. And the stigma of “socialism” is fading after the catastrophic “failure of capitalism” in the wake of the 2007-09 financial meltdown.¹⁴

¹⁴ 53% of Democrats in Gallup Poll in Nov. 2012 responded favorably to the term “socialism,” just two percentage points less than responded favorably to “capitalism.” Amazingly, 23% of Republicans also responded favorably to “socialism.” The term “failure of capitalism” is due to the maverick conservative

Fourth, I am not saying that a commitment to Marxism is inconsistent with a socialism worth having, that Marxism leads to the Gulag, or any such “second thoughts.” Even Leszek Kolakowski, summing up his extremely hostile but immensely learned appraisal of Marxism, dismisses the idea that Marxism was “the efficient cause” of formerly existing Communism as “absurd”: “Communism was a bastard version of the socialist ideal,” he writes “owing its origins to many historical circumstances and chances, of which Marxist ideology was one.”¹⁵ Even if we agree with Kolakowski that the romantic ideal of social unity that is so prominent in Marx can only be realized in an industrial society in a “despotic system of government” — a view that cannot be easily dismissed¹⁶ — that is not the only possible realization of Marxism. Moreover, if Marxism’s embodiments in formerly existing socialism have been repressive, there are currents of Marxism to which we owe thanks for many of the main democratic achievements of the last century. American Communism, for example, may have apologized for the indefensible, but played an essential role in the fight for civil rights for African Americans. Communists and Trotskyists were crucial in the labor and union struggles in the 1930s, and in the antiwar movement of the 1960s.

Fifth and finally, unlike Aronson and so many others, I do not say that Marxism is refuted as a *theory*. Here I will say dogmatically that I think that while class analysis is not the master

Judge Richard A. Posner, *see* his *A Failure of Capitalism: The Crisis of '08 and the Descent into Depression* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 2009). Despite his newfound Keynesianism and rejection of neoliberalism, Judge Posner, whatever his many genuine virtues – not many people have the courage and honesty to reconsider a lifetime’s adherence to positions for which they themselves are responsible, in many ways, for developing – would almost certainly not respond favorably to “socialism.”

¹⁵ Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*: vol. 3: *The Breakdown*, trans. P.S. Falla. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), p. 526

¹⁶ *Id.*, p. 527. Hegel’s account of “absolute freedom and terror” presented an argument that a society based on the aspiration to realize a general will tend to degenerate into despotism and terror. G.F.W. Hegel,

key to understanding the universe, it is indispensable to understanding society; some version of historical materialism the only remotely credible theory of history, and Marx's critique of capitalism as exploitative is right.¹⁷ Marx's summary of the "theory of the communists in a single sentence: Abolition of private property,"¹⁸ states the core of the project of the emancipation of labor. Many Marxist ideas are indeed untenable--the desirability of the abolition of markets, in my view, for one; and I would add to this as well the labor theory of value and the hope that the state and law might wither away. In addition, there are gaps in the tradition, for example, in the analysis of women's oppression, despite attention to the "woman question" in Second International Marxism. But any theoretical tradition faces problems and lacunae, so this should not bother us unless we take too seriously the Marxist-Leninist idea that Marxism is the One True Theory of Everything. It is the theory of capitalism and workers' self-emancipation; it is approximately true; and that is quite a lot.

Now that the Red Menace has evaporated, even many advocates of current order are rediscovering the theoretical virtues of Marx's analysis of capitalism as exploitative, unstable, and alienating. The *New Yorker*, for example, touted Marx as "the next great thinker" in a series in fall 1997.¹⁹ In 2005, Marx won the BBC/s "greatest philosopher of all time" poll with 28% of

Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), pp. 355-63.

¹⁷ To reduce the sting of dogmatism at least in my own case: I have defended historical materialism in part in, among other places, Justin Schwartz, "Functional Explanation and Metaphysical Individualism," *Philosophy of Science* 60 (1993), pp. 278-301, the theory of ideology in "The Paradox of Ideology," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 23/4 (1993), pp. 543-74, and the theory of exploitation in (among other places) "What's Wrong with Exploitation?" *Noûs* (1995), pp. 158-88, most recently in "Neoliberalism and the Law: How Historical Materialism Can Illuminate Recent Governmental and Judicial Decision Making," *New Labor Forum* 22, pp. 71-77 (2013).

¹⁸ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works* [MECW], vol. 6. (New York: International Publishers 1976), p. 498.

¹⁹ John Cassidy, "The Next Thinker: The Return of Karl Marx," *The New Yorker* (Oct. 20 & 27, 1997).

votes, outdistancing runner-up David Hume, with 12.7%.²⁰ I do not want to defend a preferred version of the theory here, just to indicate that my doubts have nothing to do with the worry that there is no defensible version of the theory.

III. The End Of Marxism As A Movement

So what's the problem? It is this. As Callinicos properly insists, Marxism is not just a theory or research program, even if it is a good one. On its own terms, it is, or was, a practical project, a revolutionary praxis, a movement, not just a set of ideas. For over a century, self-identified Marxist political organizations and states fought capitalism and imperialism in the name of Marxism. In the late 19th century, Marxism became the ideology of the German workers' movement, then the world's, largely on the strength of its standing among the German workers. In the 20th century, Marxism drew its authority from the prestige of the Russian revolution, becoming in the Leninist variant the revolutionary theory of Bolshevik practice. Outside Russia this strain made little headway until World War II, while social democracy shed its Marxist commitments. The Communists won renewed respect in the Resistance during World War II, and after the war attained actual power in Asia and Eastern Europe. Although Leninism never mattered in America except as a bogeyman, worldwide, the movement drew the passionate allegiance of many tens of millions of workers and peasants as well as radical intellectuals.

But this is almost ancient history. As a practical project, the appeal of Marxism has faded, to say the least. In the advanced capitalist countries, self-identified Marxism has not attracted significant numbers of workers to its ranks for at least three generations. In the United States, it never did. In the poorer nations its advance was halted a generation ago. The long-

defeated Sandinista revolution of 1979 seems, in retrospect, to have marked its high tide. Nor is this state of affairs likely to change in the foreseeable future. If I may be forgiven a lengthy quotation, I cannot sum up the fate the movement better than Eric Hobsbawm did in considering the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union:

After 1956, . . . the international Communist movement visibly began to disintegrate, . . . [but] the fifty-seven varieties of Trotskyists, Maoists, [and] revolutionary Marxists . . . [never] amounted to anything. . . . [T]he most systematic attempt to spread revolution along these lines [by Cuba in the 1960s] . . . did not even begin to look like getting anywhere. Unlike the revolutionary wave of 1917-19, and the second wave that followed World War Two, the third wave, coinciding with the world crises of the 1970s, even lacked a unified ideological tradition The most important social upheaval of this period . . . , the Iranian revolution, looked to Muhammed and not to Marx. The Communists, though central to the ending of the last holdovers of [European fascism], were soon sidelined . . . [W]hatever China will be like . . . will have little to do with Lenin and less with Marx. . . . Outside the [ex-Soviet bloc, the three or so Marxist] parties with genuine mass support . . . want[] to rejoin international social democracy. We are seeing not the crisis of a type of regime, movement, or economy, but its end.²¹

I invoke no historical inevitabilities. Obviously predictions about the future of society must be tentative and fallibilistic. It is *possible* that Marxism might revive to inspire mass movements in its name once again. But it is not likely. If we take seriously Marx's precept that our analysis should proceed from the dynamic of the actual situation, I think we must conclude that the odds are far better that Marxism as a movement is one of those "fighting faiths" that "time has upset," in Justice Holmes' expression.²² It is more than plausible that Marxism so understood is indeed over. The moment of the October revolution is finished as that of the German SPD as a

²⁰ *BBC Press Office*, "Marx wins In Our Time's Greatest Philosopher Vote," http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2005/07_july/13/radio4.shtml

²¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Goodbye to All That," in *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*, Robin Blackburn, ed. (London: Verso 1991) pp. 116-17. Of the Marxist parties to which Hobsbawm alluded in 1991, the Brazilian PT (now in power) and the South African Communist Party (allied with the ruling ANC) have accommodated themselves to some extent to neoliberalism, and the Italian Communist Party, as noted above, has abandoned its Marxist commitments and dissolved into the "Democratic Party of the Left." Outside, perhaps, Cuba, there are today no mass Marxist parties that cleave to the old ideals in any form at all.

revolutionary movement; 1989 was the 1914 of that moment. There is no revolutionary movement to inherit the mantle. That is what I mean by saying that the point of being a Marxist is unclear in these circumstances.

Although I have said that as a theory Marxism is sound enough whatever the fate of Marxism as a movement or as revolutionary practice, the two are not so nicely separated. The problem for Marxism posed by the collapse of the movement is not external to the theory. Marxism never saw itself as just a theory. It saw itself as Marx himself saw communism, as the “real movement,” not an ideal to which reality would have to adjust itself.²³ Its vindication depended in part on success on its own terms. And the Marxist movement has taken those terms to involve not just successful anticapitalist struggles, but also avowedly Marxist organization and vocabulary. As the historical movement has developed, Marxism claimed that self-conscious identification with the movement as Marxist was necessary to the success of these struggles, that other ways of doing it would not work. Marxism put its own vindication in terms of its success *as Marxism*, not in terms of the realization of its goals described in some other vocabulary and realized in some other organizational form. With the collapse of that vocabulary and those forms, has Marxism not in some sense failed on its own terms, pragmatically refuted itself?

IV. Minimalist “Marxism” And Marx’s NonMarxist Scientific Socialism

Now Marx himself suggested a different conception. The *Manifesto* stated that the communists “(1) do not form a political party opposed to existing working class parties; (2) have no separate interests apart from those of the whole proletariat; and (3) do not set up sectarian

²² *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616, 630 (1919) (Holmes, J. dissenting).

²³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in MECW, vol. 5, p. 49.

political principles by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement.”²⁴ This might well be read to mean that there is no distinctively “Marxist” organizational form, such a Marxist party apart from the workers’ movement itself, nor any favored vocabulary or set of ideals described in particular terms (“sectarian political principles”), such as something called “Marxism,” embodied in the writings of Marx or some interpretation thereof. Elsewhere, Marx said that the revolutionary class “finds the content and material for its own revolutionary activity directly in its own situation: foes to be laid low, measures to be dictated by the needs of the struggles . . . ; the consequences of its own deeds drive it on. *It makes no theoretical inquiries into its own task.*”²⁵ This is an overstatement from the most eminent theoretician of the working class movement. He sought to interpret the world as well as to change it. But taken together with his skepticism about “sectarian principles,” it can be read as a warning against elevating his own ideas into sectarian principles. Later, when that threat was become reality, Marx said, in response to the effusions of certain disciples, “If anything is certain, it is that I am not a Marxist!”²⁶

Neither Marx nor Engels ever called themselves Marxists. They preferred the term “scientific socialists.”²⁷ The term “Marxist” was coined as a pejorative (to imply improper worship of a personality) by Bakunin in his struggles with Marx in the First International; it was taken up by a hostile bourgeois press, and was expressly rejected by Marx’s followers like

²⁴ Marx and Engels, “Manifesto,” in MECW, vol. 6, p. 497.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France: 1848 to 1850*, in MECW, vol. 10, p. 56 (emphasis added).

²⁶ Engels, Letter to Eduard Bernstein, November 2-3, 1882, in MECW, vol. 46, p. 346. Engels wrote to Bernstein that Marx said to his son-in-law LaFargue, in French: “*Ce qui’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste.*”

²⁷ See Georges Haupt, “Marx and Marxism,” in *The History of Marxism*, vol. 1: (*Marxism in Marx’s Day*, Eric Hobsbawm, ed. (Bloomington: Univ. of Indiana Press 1982), p. 276.

Becker and Perret in the early 1870s.²⁸ The adoption of the terms “Marxist” and “Marxism” in something like the positive sense that Marxists were later to use them was mainly due to Kautsky, a decade later.²⁹ While “Marxism” indeed became the preferred self-description of socialists who looked to Marx for inspiration over the subsequent century, non-Marxist “Marxism” has a respectable pedigree.

So far as that conception of Marxism goes, my worries will not reach it. But that is not how *Marxism* has conceived itself. Marxists have rather thought it was very important to proclaim that we *are* Marxists. On the minimalist conception, we can keep Marx, because he was so right about so much, but this does not address the worry that *Marxism* is exhausted, that there is no longer a point to proclaiming, “I am a Marxist.”

V. The Test of Practice

The problem not just that the Marxist movements have evaporated or collapsed, that the Marxist states are gone, and in those that remain, for the most part, the organization is a tyranny and the vocabulary is window dressing. It is also that the identification, vocabulary, and organizational forms are anathema to precisely those for whom Marxism claims to speak. Of course Marxism is anathema to the ruling classes, but that is not an objection in Marxist terms, nor should it be to any who share Marx’s aim of working class self-rule. It is, however, an objection that working people, the poor and the oppressed, no longer respond to Marxist appeals or join Marxist organizations, and indeed disdain and fear those who identify themselves as Marxists. This has been true almost without qualification in the United States, is generally and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 266-68. Perret deplored that “sections [of the International] have grouped around proper names [such as “Marx” or “LaSalle”]. . . *contrary to our principles and the interests of workers’ emancipation*” (emphasis added).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-82.

increasingly valid in Europe, though there officially Marxist parties have lingered until fairly recently and even formerly won significant, if drastically falling, numbers of votes.³⁰

Increasingly it is less true in the less developed nations, where today religious and nationalistic ideologies, often of a frighteningly reactionary cast --Islamic fundamentalism is currently prominent, are far more effective mobilizing devices than Marxism. Even the handful of genuinely radical movements in Third World countries, like the Zapatistas of Chiapas, Mexico, seeks new vocabularies rather than expressing themselves in the old Marxist cadences.³¹

Measured by its own test of practice, Marxism as it has conceived itself has in the last

³⁰ The French Communist Party, once the largest (plurality) Party in France, with over a quarter the popular vote through the 1950s and over a hundred seats in National Assembly, is down to seven seats today (2013) and polling in the single digits. It has removed the hammer and sickle from its membership cards. See *The Guardian*, Feb. 10, 2013. For vote figures and sources, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/French_Communist_Party. The Italian Communist Party, once the biggest in any Western country, with 2.3 million members in 1947, and 34+% of the vote as recently as 1976, dissolved itself, abandoning Marxist goals and language, into the Democratic Party of the Left in 1991, after the fall of the USSR. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Italian_Communist_Party.

The CPUSA, which claimed 50,000-60,000 members in 1919, and played an important role in union and anti-racist struggles through the 1930s and even the 1940's, was decimated by its own adherence to hard line Marxism-Leninism and Cold War repression, which incidentally involved banning its members from union leadership positions in the Taft-Hartley Act, and by the 1950s has declined to less than 10,000 members, of whom 1,500 were FBI informants. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Communist_Party_USA. After the fall of the USSR, the CPUSA, which rejected Gorbachev's initiatives in glasnost and perestroika, split into a hardline Marxist-Leninist Party and the social democratic Committees of Correspondence (CoC), whose members included such prominent former CPUSA figures as folk singer Pete Seeger and black militant Angela Davis. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Committees_of_Correspondence_for_Democracy_and_Socialism. Neither CPUSA nor the CoC has ever been an electoral force to be considered in the US, and since the Popular Front of the 1930s, the CPUSA has generally supported moderate Democrats. "Communism is Twentieth-Century Americanism", announced Party Central Committee Chair Earl Browder in 1941, but while the Popular Front left an enduring cultural legacy in the U.S., see Jon Wiener, "Popular Culture and the Popular Front," in *Reviews in American History* 25/4, pp. 625-630 (1997), the slogan failed to convince its intended audience, the workers. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Red_Scare#cite_note-11.

³¹ See *Shadows of Tender Fury: The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante Marcos and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation*, trans. Frank Bardacke, et al. (New York: Monthly Review Press 1995). The editors and translators note that the EZLN expresses itself in a range of voices, from a semi-playful guide for tourists to official diplomatic language to letters and stories written in a personal tone.

half century definitively failed in its aspirations, not merely in not attaining socialist aims, but even in winning the working class to those aims, and to itself. Some of this effect may be mere ideology, the result of relentless propaganda, although the effect is real in any case, but some of it is not. It is not as if the Marxists' record is so good, in terms of delivering either freedom or prosperity, that it is irrational for ordinary people to doubt their bona fides.

In any event, there is a deeper consideration. In the industrialized West, Marxist organizations have been to a certain degree a victim of their own success. When they had strength, it was "rooted in a situation in which [the workers] had little social power" and the Marxist parties could "provide [the workers] with better protection than . . . ruling classes had been able or were willing to provide."³² With the increasing spread of power or remedies to their proletarian constituencies, Marxism had less to offer workers than less radical alternatives.

I do not wax rosy about the situation of working people under neoliberalism, and I emphatically deny that capitalism has solved its fundamental problems to the degree that it is futile to insist on alternatives. After 2007-09 and its lengthening shadow, only the ideologically unreachable need further proof than their own paychecks, if they are lucky enough to have paychecks. However, the gains that Marxists, among others, helped to win in the developed countries — union organizing rights, wage and hour laws, antidiscrimination protections, and the like — remain, even if they remain under attack, and, combined with the decline of Marxist organizations with the power to effect any changes at all, the result is a strong set of incentives to seek other means of advancing the class and individualist interests than Marxist activism. In addition to helping explain why workers might rationally reject self-avowed Marxism, this also

³² Giovanni Arrighi, "Marxist Century, American Century," in *After the Fall*, p. 160.

helps explain, as Przeworski insists, why first the social democrats and now the communists, both East and West, have accommodated themselves to capitalism.³³

In the less developed nations, looking back on the fall of Communism, Marxist organizations and states may better be regarded as a victim of their aspirations. Despite some impressive achievements in industrialization and social welfare, they utterly failed to deliver the kind of liberation and prosperity promised by Marxist theory. Arguably this was predicted by Marx himself, who regarded a high degree of social and economic development as a precondition for a successful transition to a post-capitalist society.³⁴ Be that as it may, Marxism no longer attracts its own constituencies, East or West, North or South.

In *A Dream of John Ball*, a meditation on the failed English Peasant's Rebellion of 1381, the 19th century communist, poet, and designer William Morris wrote:

I pondered these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes it turns out not to be what they want, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name.³⁵

Is this not the situation of Marxists today? What's in this name, disconnected from a living movement, abhorred by those whom it purports to benefit, owning nothing but a great deal of truth and a powerful set of analytical tools? If truth and analytical power is enough, Marxism is not "over." But on Marxism's own terms, is truth enough? "The philosophers have only

³³ Adam Przeworski, *Capitalism and Social Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985).

³⁴ See G.A. Cohen's account of the failure of Soviet Communism in the revised edition of *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press 2001). One need not accept in totality Cohen's "technological" interpretation of Marx's theory of history to see the force behind his suggestion that socialism in backwards countries will be backwards socialism.

³⁵ William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, in *Three Works by William Morris*, A.L. Morton. ed. (New York: International Publishers 1968), p. 53.

interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”³⁶

VI. Responses and Replies

I would like to anticipate some responses. Two seem quite inadequate, but there are real worries I have with the line of thought I have been exploring. First, it will not do to say that Marxism has not been tried, so how can it have failed? That is colorable with respect to socialism, if we understand socialism as a society where the working class, and not merely a party that purports to represent it, really does hold political power. That has not been tried. But Marxism *has* been tried. It has been a great historical movement, maybe the great historical movement of the last 150 years. If it had *not* been tried, we should not now be discussing whether its current debacle is a terminal crisis. It would have been long ago consigned to irrelevance.

Second, also unimpressive is the argument that Marxists have to take the long view. Advocates of this view say that maybe Marxism is down for now, but in decades or centuries it may revive as the lethal legacy of Stalinism fades, particularly if, as I have asserted, the theory is in some form basically sound. But this hope seems rather forlorn, particularly as it gives up on success on its own terms within our lifetimes and those of generations to come. If the theory is indeed sound, struggle and resistance to exploitation will continue, and this struggle is likely to have much Marxist content, but nothing suggests that the changes that rang for past generations will ring again for future generations. Why think that in a hundred or two hundred years – if we have that much time – a tradition that is now broken and discredited is likely to revive under the old name, with the classical icons and characteristic reference points that have defined Marxism

³⁶ Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in MECW, vol. 5, pp. 5, 8.

as a fighting faith in generations past? I see neither any current tendencies, any “real movement,” that would point to such a revival, nor indeed any historical precedent for history repeating itself in this way. Besides, I recall that someone once said something about the way in which history repeats itself, when it does. The first time around it was certainly as tragedy. Are we waiting for the farce to begin?

But there are more valid concerns. First, should we not refrain from kicking away the ladder while we are climbing it, however rickety it may have become? Perhaps we need some new radical theory that integrates what is still valid in Marxism with feminism, ecology, and so forth, and which also connects with a living movement. But while there *is* a living movement, scattered, unfocused, inarticulate, but definitely alive, we have no such theoretical alternative now. The other ideas in play, for example, radical democracy, postmodernism, post-Marxism, or anarchism, are not contenders either in terms of theoretical adequacy or practical popular appeal. I cannot here survey their inadequacies, but must content myself by saying dogmatically that Marxist critiques of these approaches for abandoning class analysis, among other defects, strike me as persuasive.³⁷ Certainly these notions have not gripped any large segments of the population in the way that Marxism did for so long, and relatively quickly from its inception.

Two alternatives that are not wholly subject to this critique are feminism and environmentalism, both of which have great anticapitalist potential as well as popular appeal, and the first of which, as Schweickart has argued in *After Capitalism*, has been the most revolutionary ideology of our own time, having put full humanity for half the human race

³⁷ For useful Marxist critiques of post-Marxism, postmodernism, and radical democracy, see Ellen Meiskins Wood, *The Retreat From Class: A New “True” Socialism* (London: Verso 1986), Norman Geras, *The Literature of Revolution: Essays on Marxism*. (London: Verso 1986), and Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press 1990).

irrevocably on the agenda for the first time in human history.³⁸ Neither, however, has produced an integrated synthesis either in theory or practice that would allow us to say that it has *aufgehoben* Marxism, transcended it while incorporating its truths at a higher level. These theories and movements have not yet made Marxism dispensable.

Second, to give up on Marxism is to risk giving up on the coherence, utility, and progress of a vital intellectual tradition. More is involved than Marx, and this in two ways at least. First, Marxism offers a way of seeing things whole that is extraordinarily valuable, tying together an apparently disparate and unconnected bundle of social phenomena into an integrated and dynamic vision, even when the more extreme claims to having solved the riddle of the universe are abandoned. Marxism's emphasis on "totality" has seemed to some both totalitarian and delusive. Certainly, great practical and theoretical evils have ensued from those who insisted that Marxism was the One True Science, particularly when they could enforce this doctrine with the backing of the police. But even more modest and respectful versions have immense unifying potential for understanding and action, and giving up that would be giving up a lot.

Finally, Marxism has been a collective project, a conversation involving, among others, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin, Trotsky, Gramsci, and Lukacs, whose voices radicals should heed, and extending up through the present. There is a danger, if people ceased to think of themselves as Marxists, that this conversation would be relegated to the museum of intellectual history, raided occasionally for an idea or tool. Moreover, theoretical progress within a research program depends in part on the commitment of researchers determined to make it work.³⁹ Imre Lakatos

³⁸ See David Schweickart, *After Capitalism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield 2002), p. 14.

³⁹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press (1996).

claimed that Marxism was a degenerating research program;⁴⁰ but it became more intellectually vital than ever, at least through the mid 1990s, even as it lost political coherence. One might wonder, however, whether the power and prospects of the theory can survive without the self-identification of theorists as Marxists who are committed to its development. When the leading analytical Marxists (John Roemer, Jon Elster, G.A. Cohen) abandoned the Marxist label, for example, they also turned away from development of the theory. As someone once warned, what's not busy being born is busy dying.

Then there are personal concerns. Marxism has a strong emotional charge; it is an identity, not just an idea; indeed, it has aspects of a faith. The language of “orthodoxy” is old in the tradition, along with a sense that the identification defines which side you are on. In the words of *The Red Flag*, that flag “witnessed many a deed and vow; we will not change its color now.” I do not invoke the religious analogy dismissively. Marxism has claimed to be a *rational* faith, and the problem it faces is not that it requires one to believe things that are not rationally supportable — at least, not too many of them — but that the faithful no longer turn out, if they ever did. But apostasy is hard for those who have grown up in that faith. Then what does one say then? How does one go on? And there is the connected concern, that giving up Marxism is the first step in a short slide to the other side, a path that many formerly left intellectuals have followed.⁴¹ That is one way of going on.

Finally, to make the personal political, one might wonder whether the fate of socialism itself is tied to Marxism, the most powerful theoretical expression of socialist ideas, that to give

⁴⁰ Imre Lakatos, *The Methodology of Scientific Research Programmes*, John Worrall and Gregory Currie, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press 1978), pp. 3-7.

⁴¹ For some dismal chronicles of this sort, see Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press 1987).

up the identification is to become reconciled to capitalism. There is a meaning that is implicated in saying, “I am an ex-Marxist” that shows that Marxism is not just a theory, and that “more” may be important to the attainment the emancipatory goals of the movements that have born the name of Marxism.

VII. “*Je Ne Suis Pas Marxiste!*”: An Inconclusive Conclusion

I share these concerns, and so I do not say that there is no point in being a Marxist today. There may be. But if there is, the only kind of Marxist that an intellectually honest person can be today is one who is thoroughly disillusioned about *Marxism*, if not about emancipation, without any hopes in the foreseeable future for the revival of the movements bearing the name, using the vocabulary, or embodied in the traditional form. To be a “Marxist” today is necessarily to be a Marxist *faut de mieux*, for want of something better, and because one fears what one might become if one were not, rather than from hope for the future. Is there a point in being that sort of Marxist? Does it even count as being a Marxist in any meaningful sense, as opposed to someone who just shares useful items from Marx’s toolbox, along with J.S. Mill’s, Max Weber’s, Keynes’, Hayek’s (yes, him too), Foucault’s, Richard Rorty’s, and anyone else’s who might have something to promote the remaining defensible goals Marx once advocated? I don’t know.

When I submitted an earlier draft of this piece to a socialist journal, it was rejected (by one of many journals that rejected it on similar grounds) with the comment that it was a “cry of despair.” I do not think that it is, although I cannot pretend that it is a cheery message of hope. It is rather an expression of the pessimism of the mind that Gramsci said must accompany optimism of the will.⁴² There is hope, but circling the wagons and reciting the rituals of the old

⁴² I cannot resist reporting Phil Gasper’s brilliant quip, that my position is rather one of optimism of the

faith in the gathering dark cannot sustain that hope or contribute to its realization. The insights of the tradition, and they are deep and vast, must be preserved and developed. But as a movement the tradition itself is at an end in any historically recognizable form. Resistance to oppression, not least in its virulently ultra-capitalist neoliberal form, will continue, and may succeed to a greater or lesser degree, but rarely if ever under the old banners.

Must we not say, with Marx himself, “*Ce qui’il y a de certain c’est que moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*”? To reject this possibility is to hold off despair with delusion, and coffin the real hopes of our movements in the organic forms they take inside religious traditions that, if effective, threaten to smother those movements; and if not effective, will sideline the true believers as irrelevant. In the Preface to the first edition of *Capital*, vol. 1, Marx, welcomed “every opinion based on scientific criticism.”⁴³ The last thing anyone ever seriously influenced by Marx should want to be, is a true believer.

intellect and pessimism of the will. However, the “pessimism of the will” here is directed towards the prospects for the resurrection of Marxism as a movement, not towards those for a vital and perhaps successful struggle for the realization of socialist ideals.

⁴³ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, MECW, p. 3.