MARXISM AFTER THE COLLPASE OF THE COMMUNISMS

by Immanuel Wallerstein

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"Marxism..... is inevitably bound to perish, sooner or later, and this applies, too, to its form as *theory*... In retrospect (and only in retrospect), it will be possible to say, from the manner of its perishing, what kind of stuff Marxism was made of." (Balibar, 1991, 154).

Marx has been regularly pronounced dead and he has been just as often resuscitated. As with any thinker of his stature, he is worth rereading primarily in the light of current realities. Today it is not only Marx who is once more dying but a whole series of states which have labelled themselves Marxist-Leninist and which are, by and large, collapsing. Some are happy about this, some sad, but few are trying to draw up a careful and judicious balance-sheet of the experience.

Let us remember at the outset that Marxism is not the summa of the ideas and writings of Marx but rather a set of theories, analyses, and recipes for political action, no doubt inspired by Marx's reasoning, that were made into a sort of dogma. This version of Marxism, the dominant one, was the product of two historical parties which constructed it, in tandem and successively, jointly but not in collaboration one with the other: the German Social-Democratic Party (especially before 1914) and the Bolshevik Party, later to become the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

Although this dominant version of "Marxism" was never the only one, other versions have had a very limited audience, at least until rather recently. The true origins of the "explosion" of Marxism, of which Lefebvre (1980) wrote, is to be found in the world revolution of 1968. This event coincides more or less with the onset of the Brazhnovian otagnation in the USSR and the subsequent growing turmoil and disintegration within the so-called socialist bloc.

This coincidence confuses the analysis somewhat, for it makes it incumbent on us to attempt the difficult exercise of distinguishing between the arguments of the "Marxism of the parties" (the dominant version of Marxism) which have been strongly compromised, if not totally refuted, by the collapse of "really existing socialism" on the one hand, and on the other hand, the arguments of Marx himself (or at least those aspects of his thought and of Marxist praxis) which were not, or at least not essentially, involved in this historical experience. My argument will be quite simple. What has died is Marxism as a theory of modernity, a theory that was elaborated alongside the theory of modernity of liberalism, indeed largely inspired by it. What has not yet died is Marxism as a critique of modernity and of its historical manifestation, the capitalist world-economy. What has died is Marxism-Leninism as a reformist strategy. What has not yet died is the antisystemic thrust-popular and "Marxian" in language-which inspires real social forces.

I believe that domihant Marxism, which became Marxism-Leninism, was based on five principal propositions, made not by Marx-scholars but by Marxist militants, as spelled out over the years in the praxis of the parties.

1. In order to achieve humanity's ultimate goal, communist society, the necessary first step was to take state power as fast as possible, which was only possible by making a revolution.

This thesis is less self-evident than it seems. What does it mean to "take state power"? And even harder, what is a "revolution"? The internal party debates about these tactical questions were always heated and never reached definitive conclusions. This is why the actual political decisions were quite diverse and always seemed somewhat opportunistic.

However, two images predominated: either a popular insurrection or an overwhelming victory in elections, either of which was seen to launch a fundamental, lasting change in the structures of power which was presumed to be one from which no turnback was possible.

Parties out of power sought to reach such a turning-point by whatever means they could. Those who had achieved power (even if by a route not envisaged in theory) sought to remain in power by whatever means they could, thereby to prove that the "revolution" was indeed such an irreversible turning-point. The coming to power of the party was in that sense seen as analogous to Christ coming to earth. It did not represent the end of time, far from it, but it was a moment in which history was transformed. If the events of 1989-91 were so earthshaking,

especially for Marxist-Leninists, it was because the concept of an irreversible historical transformation was therein given the lie. More than a deep disappointment, the events meant the collapse of the basic premises of political action.

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2. In order to obtain and retain state power, it was essential that so-called progressive forces and/or the working class create an organized, universal party.

Whether it was the mass party advocated by the German Social-Democrats, or the avant-garde party advocated by the Bolsheviks, the party was supposed to act as the spiritual home of its leaders and its members, who were called upon to devote their whole lives to the attainment and retention of state power.

The party was thus seen as being the central (even the only) focus of the life of its members. Any limk with other organizations, or even any interest outside the party's program was thought to be a serious threat to its efficacity. This, far more than doctrinal atheism, is the explanation of the great suspicion of religions. This is the same reason why the party was hostile to nationalist, ethnic, feminist, and other such movements.

In short, the party asserted that class conflicts were primordial and all other conflicts were epiphenomenal. Therefore the party repeatedly argued that these other struggles constituted a diversion from the central task, unless they were integrated into its current program for momentary, secondary tactical reasons. What it feared above all was that its members were not unremittingly loyal to it. While one may doubt that the parties in power ever created truly totalitarian states, there seems little doubt they created totalitarian parties.

There was a fundamental contradiction between these two theses. While the second thesis on the structure of the party was conceived for, and seemed well adapted to, the mobilizing necessary to achieve power, it did not all serve well as a principle once the party was in power. The role of the party in power was deeply ambiguous. In reality, to the extent that it functioned at all, the party in power was simply a decision-making body in which a tiny group settled all current issues. The power of the leadership was quite personal and surrounded by a sort of complicit opaqueness. For most members, the party became nothing but an instrument of individual upward mobility in daily life.

At that point, the party had become anything but a spiritual home. To those outside it, it seemed to be a quite illegitimate structure, and those within it tended to be cynical about it. The party was a reality that had to be taken into account, but no one was devoted to it. If the "revolution" did not turn out to be irreversible, it was precisely because of the nature of the party once it had taken power. The main objective of the popular destruction of the Communist regimes was to throw out this kind of party, as soon as the changed world context made this possible.

3. In order to go from capitalism to communism, it was necessary to pass through a phase called the dictatorship of the proletariat, that is, to turn over power entirely and exclusively to the working class.

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The two key words, dictatorship and proletariat, both raised questions. Whatever meaning was attached to "dictatorship" originally, its actual historical meaning was the denial in these regimes of all so-called bourgeois civil rights, which had been created (at least partially) in the parlimentary democracies of "liberal" states. Any organization not controlled by the party was denied not only free speech but the very right to exist. This was true as well for any centers of intellectual activity that asserted an independence from the party.

Nevertheless, even if the public debate was a monologue, this doesn't mean there was no political discussion or disagreement. But the debates were strictly private, limited to a handful of individuals. The occasional rumblings of the population which sometimes placed some limits on political decision-making was the only form of popular expression.

The dictatorship claimed legitimacy by virtue of the fact that the state and the party "represented" the working class. What was the reality? To be sure, many leaders had been workers in their youth, no doubt a larger number than in other states in the world-system. But once they had become members of the ruling class, these persons had become bourgeoisified and constituted the notorious *Nomenklatura.*

It was also no doubt true that among ordinary people, skilled workers tended to earn as much, even more than schoolteachers or an average "intellectual worker". This constituted a reversal of the usual wage hierarchy. But reversing a wage hierarchy is not the same as abolishing it.

At the worksite, the worker had no way of exercising trade-union rights vis-a-vis management. In fact, the worker had fewer possibilities of making demands than he had in non-socialist states. The workers did nonetheless have one great compensation; social security (especially job security) and the implicit right to a low level of productivity. But these social advantages depended in fact on overall state revenue, and when the states got into serious financial difficulties, provoked in part by low levels of productivity, the social safety-net suffered.

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The so-called socialist states could no longer fulfill their promises, and this resulted in a social crisis. Out of this emerged *Solidarity* and all the subsequent developments.

Despite all the official speeches, almost no one thought they were really living in a workers' state. At the very most, they believed they lived under a regime seeking an improvement in the living conditions of the workers-in other words, in a reformist state. When the few advantages these states offered declined, the regimes lost their social bases.

4. The socialist state constitute a necessary stage on the universal, correct route of progress, leading to the communist utopia.

This was the Leninist (or be more exact, the Stalinist) version of the theory of progress, itself the legacy to Marxism (as well as to liberalism) of the Enlightenment, which was in turn, by a sort of *Aufhebung* (sublation), a secularized version of Christian eschatology.

The theory of stages, founded on an unshakable belief in progress, justified everything. By affirming that everything the party, infallible guarantee of progress, did was correct, this theory provided moral and rational underpinnings not only to the first three theses but to any deviations from the paths that Marxist tradition had laid out.

Since each stage followed the rules of social evolution, there theoretically could not be regression. Furthermore, since these historical stages had been specified thanks to the party, each party member became by definition an apostle of progress. Finally, given that the workers were now in power, the state could not fail to progress infallibly. The theory of progress permitted, indeed required, that newer revolutionary states be under the protection of more advanced revolutionary states-a system of a hierarchy of elders presumed to prevail within the family of Marxist-Leninist states (and even of all progressive states). What some described as imperialism, others called natural duty. As long as public opinion had reason to believe in the reality of progress, this right of the strongest did not seem too shocking. But stagnation, exacerbating latent conflicts, aroused anti-imperialist sentiments against the Soviet Union, and thus led not only to the dislocation of Marxist-Leninist states but to the breakdown of the "world" of socialist states, a geopolitical concept that has now dissolved.

5. To make the transition from the stage of socialism (the party in power) to the stage of communism, it was necessary to "construct socialism", that is, to pursue national development.

Communist parties came to power in sovereign, independent (but besieged) states. Whereas Marx had predicted that the first revolutions would occur in the most technologically advanced countries, the successive seizures of power had actually occurred in peripheral and semi-peripheral zones of the world-economy.

Thereby the 'construction of socialism' underwent a great metamorphosis. It became the process by which (semi) peripheral states would catch up with the core zones of the capitalist world-economy. There were three basic elements in this program.

The first was planning, which entailed very heavy bureaucratic structures. These structures did rather well during the period of "primitive accumulation". But as the infrastructure became more modern, the planning apparatus had to take on much more complex tasks, and this was hampered by the role of the party. Planning eventually became a kind of negotiation process between economic aids who were constantly revising the plans retrospectively to make them accord with the real results. This was clearly a formula for failure.

The second element was all-out industrialization, as autarkic as possible. This objective overlooked the fact that industrialization was more than building plant machinery; that it involved considerations of profitability, which in turn were dependent on the constantly evolving worldwide spread of technology. In point of fact, as technological progress diffused across the world (itself furthered in great part by the "construction of socialism"), the industries in the socialist states became less and less competitive and therefore less and less able to contribute to catching up with advanced countries.

The third element was a commodification so unbridled that it is hard not to view it with much irony, so counter was it to all the rhetoric about a communist society. Still, to support planning and industrialization, labour and everything else had to be subject to market transactions, even if these transactions were strictly controlled centrally.

At the outset, national development seemed to be the great achievement of the socialist countries. Rates of growth were high and optimism was the order of the day. But the economic stagnation of the 1970's and 1980s proved these states to be just as peripheral and semiperipheral as the other Third World states. It was a tremendous letdown for these states which had boasted of their rapid national development.

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In sum, one after the other, each of the five theses of the Marxism of the parties (really existing Marxism) came to be viewed skeptically by the very persons who had sustained these regimes. In getting rid of Marxism(-Leninism), they thought they were getting rid of Marx himself. But it is not so easy. Thrown out the front door, Marx threatens to sneak in the window. For Marx has nor exhausted, quite the contrary, either his political relevance or his intellectual potential. It is to this we now turn.

II

Marx's thought contains four key ideas (ideas that are largely but not exclusively Marxian) which seem to me still useful, even indispensable, to the analysis of the modern world system. Despite all the negative experiences of Marxist (-Leninist) movements and states in the twentieth century, these ideas still illuminate the political choices we have to make.

1. *Class Struggle* — "It is fairly clear that the identity of Marxism depends entirely on the definition, import and validity of its analysis of class and class struggle. Without this analysis, there is no Marxism..." (Balibar, 1991, 156).

Let us not forget first of all that a large part of the internal opposition to the Marxist-Leninist party-states was the expression of class conflict, the conflict of ordinary workers against that new somewhat peculiar variety of bourgeoisie, the *Nomenklatura*, which Marx would have had as delicious a time analysing in the Polish situation of 1980-81 as he had in his analysis of the class struggle in France between 1848-1851.

The concept that there exist classes with different, indeed antagonistic, interests is not an idea that Marx invented. It was in the air in Western Europe in all the major discussions from 1750 to 1850. It wasn't even a left-wing concept originally. But Marx and Engels gave it great notoriety in the *Communist Manifesto*, and ever since it has been virtually the defining concept of workers' movements.

Marx did not call on workers (or anyone else) to start a class struggle; he observed that they were fighting one, often without even being fully aware of it.

Marx based his argument on two widely (if not universally) accepted premises. The first was that all people seek to improve their material conditions and hence struggle against those who exploit them or take advantage of their difficulties. This claim is a strong one, hard to deny. The fact that the exploited are often weak, resigned, and afraid, and rarely strong, determined, and bold is perhaps true. But it is merely a comment on the tactical probabilities of the class struggle, and not a refutation of its existence.

The second premise was that people who are in objectively parallel or similar situations tend to act in similar ways, such that we can talk of group responses (in this case of class responses), although of course no group is ever totally homogeneous or monolithic. Furthermore, if one refuses to analyze the actions of social groups, it becomes impossible to explain social reality. Once again, Marx was merely underlining the historic reality of class struggle. To argue against this premise, we must show empirically that such struggles do not occur, which is surely very hard to do. Or, one most argue, somewhat more plausibly, that the observation about class struggles is correct but overstated. In this view, the importance of class struggles is less than Marxists suggest because other forms of struggle loom larger. This is a frequent objection, and not only from the right. Throughout the world, analysts underline the importance of rationalist, racial, ethnic, religious and gender struggles. It is clear such struggles exist and are important, and it must be admitted that Marxists (including Marx himself) tended for a long time to neglect, denigrate, ignore, even denounce them, for one simple reason. They were haunted by the fear of a divided working class and thus tried in every way to overcome these divisions. This led them deliberately to understate the theoretical importance of any social cleavage other than that of class.

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There have been two major objections to this concept. The first is a moral, hence a political, objection. It goes like this: "Yes, there are class conflicts here and there, but they are neither inevitable nor desirable." This amounts to saying that class struggle is merely a political option (and hence a voluntary choice) and therefore its moral and rational character is open to debate. Persons (usually on the political right) who make this argument are in effect preaching to the working class a policy of negotiation, reconciliation and collaboration.

However efficacious such a policy may be, such recommendations are alien to Marxist analysis. Although there is undeniably a certain characteristic tone of moralizing in Marx's writing, Marx always disclaimed being a preacher or a prophet. Rather he claimed to be an analyst, a scientific analyst. Hence, anyone who wishes to refute Marx must place himself at the same level of analysis.

The inadequacy of Marxist analysis of nationalist, racial, ethnic, or gender struggle has been widely noted for at least two decades now, that is to say, long before the collapse of the Communisms in 1989. Shall we however therefore conclude that all these social struggles are equally important? Marx himself tried to show in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* how the struggles of small peasant proprietors was in the end a form of working class struggle.

The thesis that class struggles are invevitable and fundamental is not at all disproved by the outbreak of other forms of struggle, for it is always possible to argue that the latter were masked forms of the former (see Wallerstein, 1991a, b). Indeed Marx's thesis is greatly strengthened to the degree that one can argue persuasively that many class struggles are conducted under the label of struggles between "peoples." Of course, we must spell out why and how this should be so. But once done, we have a firmer understanding of the ups and downs of modern history. Needless to say, however, it then becomes impossible to exalt the merits of a single, all-encompassing organized party.

2. Polarization — Marx places great importance on the phenomenon of polarization, in two senses. On the one hand, Marx insists on the tendency to economic polarization, immiserization, by which he means that the poor are getting poorer and the rich richer. On the other hand, he also seeks to analyze a social polarization, by which he means everyone is becoming either bourgeois or proletarian, and all intermediate and hard to categorize groups are disappearing.

The thesis of immiserization has long come up against strong resistance on the grounds that, for at least a century, the real income of the working class in industrialized countries has been rising. The conclusion drawn was that not only was there no absolute polarization but that even relative polarization had declined due to the redistributions of the welfare state. Thus, Marx was quite mistaken, it is argued.

It is certainly true that the real income of the working classes (or more exactly

of skilled workers) has been rising, such that an absolute polarization between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat has not occurred (although it is less clear what we can say about relative polarization). But in taking each industrialzed state separately, we are committing the same theoretical error made by both the Marxists of the parties and the classical liberals. In reality, the countries in question are part and parcel of the capitalist world-economy, and it is within the latter that the processes Marx described occur. And as soon as one takes the capitalist world-economy as the unit of analysis, one sees two things.

First, immiserization is constant at the level of the world-economy. It is not only relative (even the World Bank accepts this) but absolute (as witnessed, for example, by the growing inability of peripheral zones to provide adequately for their populations in basic foodstuffs).

And, as far as social polarization is concerned,one can deny it only by giving to the true bourgeoisie and proletariat definitions that are far too narrow (reflecting primarily the social situation of the nineteenth century). If however we use appropriate definitions—persons living essentially on current incomes, which are however polarized-then we see that Marx was quite right. An even larger proportion of the world's population falls into one of the other of these categories. They live neither on their property or their rents, but on the income they derive from their current insertion in the real economic processes of the world.

3. Ideology— Marx was a materialist. He believed that ideas do not come out of nowhere and that are not simply the product of the musings of intellectuals. Our ideas, our sciences reflect the social reality of our lives, he said, and in this sense all our ideas derive from some specific ideological climate. Thereupon, many have taken pleasure in pointing out that this logic must apply as well to Marx himself and to the working class, which Marx had placed in a special category since he considered it the universal class. To be sure, this criticism is valid, but it merely enlarges that field to which Marx's arguments apply.

Today, at a time when the entire nineteenth-century intellectual heritage of history and the social sciences has been reopened for discussion, thinking about the social bases of our ideas and our thinkers seems more necessary than ever. Obviously Marx was not the inventor of the thesis of the social determination of ideas, even though this thesis has come to be linked to his worldview. It's generally considered to be a Marxian thesis. There is therefore no reason to underestimate either the importance of an analysis of ideologies (including of Marxism) or the importance of Marx's contribution to this analysis.

4. Alienation — This concept is less familiar because it was less frequently utilized by Marx himself. This is so much the case that some analysts attribute the concept only to the "young Marx" and therefore discard it. This would be a pity since it seems to me a concept esential to Marx's thought.

Considering alienation to incarnate the evils of capitalist civilization, Marx saw its demise as the greatest achievement of a future communist society. For, according to Marx, alienation is the malady which, in its principal incarnation, property, destroys the integrity of the human person. To struggle against alienation is to struggle to restore to people their dignity.

The only way to contest this thesis is to argue that alienation is an inevitable evil (a sort of original sin), and that there is nothing that can be done about it, except to diminish over time its most pernicious expressions. It would nevertheless be difficult to deny that it is alienation that underlies the great social angers of our times.

Marx offers us the possibility of imagining another kind of social order. No doubt he has often been reproached for not having spelled out his utopias, but in that case it is up to us to do so. His thought is there. Whom, or what, would it serve to ignore it completely ?

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Secondly, the observation about the rising real revenues of the working class in industrialized countries is distorted by too narrow a perspective. We tend to forget that all these countries (orginally mainly the United States, but today all of them) are countries of immigration, receiving a steady flow of immigrants from peripheral zones, and that these immigrants are not the beneficiaries of these rising real revenues, which is another way of reminding us of the previous point about the relation of struggles of "peoples" to class struggles.

The "working class" to whom the analysis about rising real revenues applies is largely composed of the local "indigenous" or ethnically-dominant groups. The lower stratum is however largely a stratum of first or second-generation immigrants, for whom economic polarization remains reality. Not being of "local" origin, they tend to conduct their class struggles under the banner of race or ethnicity.

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