

MARX, MARXISM-LENINISM, AND SOCIALIST EXPERIENCES IN THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM

by Immanuel Wallerstein

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Marx and his ideas are flourishing, stand up better today than those of any other nineteenth-century analyst, and promise to remain central to social life in the world-system in the twenty-first century. Marxism-Leninism as a strategy and an ideology has played out its historic role and has become marginal to the ongoing political economy of the world-system. Socialist experiences in the modern world-system, if we can call them that, are in great disarray and may or may not survive in any form that will be recognizable as "socialist."

I propose to analyse Marxism-Leninism as an historical phenomenon of the modern world-system from its origins to today, in terms of responses to six questions: (1) why Leninism? (2) why a Leninist revolution in Russia first? (3) why Stalinism? (4) why a Soviet empire? (5) why deStalinization? (6) why perestroika and glasnost?

(1)

Leninism or Bolshevism is conventionally said to have come into organizational existence in 1902 with Lenin's counter-draft to the text of Plekhanov for the Second Congress (the so-called Unification Congress) of the All-Russian Social Democratic Labor Party that was held in the summer of 1903. As

we know, the Congress resulted in a split of the party. Lenin proved himself an excellent political in-fighter and he emerged with control of a party that assumed (somewhat dubiously) the appellation of Bolsheviks.

Today it is commonplace to simplify the history of world socialist movements as the story of an historic split between two tendencies, one symbolized by Eduard Bernstein and one by Lenin, consecrated in organizational form after 1921 by the existence of two Internationals, the Second and the Third. This is equally simplified as the division between reform and revolution. One can always attack the simplism of simplifications, but for the first half of the twentieth century, this classic formulation seems to me essentially correct.

The key arguments of the "revisionists" derived from a straightforward and rather economic understanding of the evolution of the world-system. They saw a process of inevitable technological advance bringing into existence an ever larger industrial working class. They presumed it would have the political consequence of the inevitable extension of political rights (especially suffrage), presumably under the joint pressure of capitalist rationality and working-class strug-

gle. They reasoned that, over the course of time, the industrial working class would dominate numerically the political arena, and thus they could quite simply vote themselves into power. Once that occurred, they could legislate an end to capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society. It followed from this reasoning that the optimal political tactic was to organize, politically and socially, as large as part of the working class (as well as their sympathizers) into a mass party.

The reasoning was clear, and to many persuasive. In point of fact, the scenario in reality turned out to be only partially true. There was continued technological advance, and the size of the industrial working class did increase. Universal suffrage did become a reality. However, it was not true that the industrial working class came to represent a large majority of the voting population. Nor was it true that all workers voted for the socialist party. Second International parties did come to power in a whole series of countries. They did not however legislate an end to capitalism. They legislated rather the so-called welfare state.

Why was Lenin resistant to this reasoning? It was because he intruded other variables into the scenario. The first and most impor-

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tant variable upon which he insisted was the strength with which the capitalist strata would resist their liquidation. He presumed they would use their existing control of the state apparatuses to struggle by any means (fair or foul) to preserve their position. He thus thought that the concept that they could be voted out of power was totally chimerical. He insisted therefore that the only way the working class would come to power was by revolution, that is, by insurrection. He saw such struggles as politico-military and therefore insisted quite plausibly, that an essential ingredient of success was a highly disciplined organization. His views on party structure

imagined Lenin's scenario would turn out to be that of China, where indeed a disciplined cadre party did organize a long politico-military struggle and did eventually seize power, installing a dictatorship of the proletariat. It is true that, wherever Third International parties came to power (by whatever means), they did legislate more or less the end of capitalism (in the narrow sense of the abolition of private property in most productive enterprises). Whether they established socialist societies has been a matter of controversy for some 70 years now, and never more so than in the last few years.

Lenin had an unspecified premise in his reasoning. He was

tion, either inwards revisionism or towards Leninism (often but not always Marxism-Leninism).

(2)

It is notorious that the Russian Revolution of 1917 was a surprise in the sense that virtually everyone in the world socialist movement expected that the "first" socialist state would be Germany. This expectation was that of the Bolsheviks as well, even Lenin. Why no one, as of say 1900, believed that Great Britain, Marx's own candidate, would be the first socialist state is a question worth pursuing, but I cannot do it here. It does demonstrate however that in the reasoning of both revisionists and Leninists there were other hidden premises.

As we know, Lenin had a hard time persuading his colleagues to try to seize power in October 1917. And in any case everyone seemed to feel that the aberration of Russia preceding Germany would soon be corrected. Indeed, of course, many argued that the new Soviet state could not survive unless something occurred rapidly in Germany. We know this expectation was never fulfilled, and after about five years was finally abandoned.

Still, why did the expectation go awry? E. H. Carr, in trying to place the Russian Revolution in historical perspective, argues:

The same ambivalence which ran through Russian 19th century history marked the Bolshevik revolution. In one aspect it was a culmination of the westernizing process, in another a revolt against European penetration. (1)

In 1914, Russia was a European country, a great military power, and a country with a significant industrial sector. But as an industrial country, it was clearly the

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followed quite logically. Since the bourgeoisie would use any means to stay in control, and since a politico-military struggle required a disciplined organization, the party should be composed of dedicated and more or less full-time cadres, and should operate, at least partially, underground. In this way, he reasoned, when the moment was ripe, the party could seize power and install a so-called dictatorship of the proletariat. His vision however of what would happen once they came to power was not too different from that of the revisionists. The new government would legislate the end of capitalism and the establishment of a socialist society.

This reasoning also was clear, and also was persuasive to many. In point of fact, this scenario too in reality turned out to be only partially true. Insurrections were successful in only a few countries. Indeed, the Russian case itself can be thus described only partially. In fact, the case that most approx-

struggling in Russia, and Russia was not Germany, a fortiori not Great Britain. That is to say, Russia was a country in which the technology was "backward" with reference to that of western Europe and North America. Furthermore, Russia was a country which, except for the briefest of periods, did not even have a parliamentary system, much less the expectation that it would move to universal suffrage within a reasonable length of time. In any case, there were very few industrial workers even if there had been universal suffrage. The great majority of the population were rural workers and peasants. Hence, the revisionist scenario seemed totally irrelevant to the Russian situation, and one must admit that Lenin was essentially correct in that assessment. It seemed to him therefore that the only viable alternative was his own program. Whether this was correct or not is difficult in hindsight to assess, since everywhere the socialist movement moved in one or the other direc-

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weakest of the European states. In 1914, Russia was simultaneously a non-European (or non-Western) country, as well as primarily an agricultural country. But as an agricultural country, it was clearly the strongest of the non-Western states. Hence, in our current language, Russia was

Italy could this possibly have been a major factor, and of course these were as a consequence the two main loci of fascist movements in the interwar years.

Finally, a successful insurrection requires some significant sector of urban human infrastructure, a

mental task, especially since Russia was an empire and not a nation-state. The rapid trend towards a one-party state, towards a mercantilist policy of "socialism in one country," and towards the conversion of the Third International into a worldwide support system for the beleaguered "first socialist state" are certainly not surprising outcomes of the situation.

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either the weakest power in the core or the strongest in the periphery. It was of course both and was virtually the exemplar of what we today call a semiperipheral country.

I would argue that a Leninist strategy could succeed only in a semiperipheral country. Therefore, retrospectively, it is not at all surprising that the first socialist "revolution" occurred in Russia. It was probably the only place in which it was truly possible in that epoch. This was clear for three main reasons. One, such an insurrection was not possible within core zones of the capitalist world-economy because the working class had too many options that seemed more attractive to them in the short run without their taking the enormous risks of insurrectionary activity. This has become clear beyond doubt in the years since 1917. It may not have seemed so obvious then.

Secondly, we have come to understand that the mobilization of mass support for an insurrectionary movement is not likely on the basis of class appeals exclusively. There must be added to the class appeals a strong dose of nationalist sentiment, what subsequently we have called anti-imperialism. But in the core zones, a sense of nationalist achievement was for most of the countries behind them. Only in Germany and

working class and an intelligentsia of some size and consciousness. Most peripheral zones did not yet have this in 1917, but Russia did. Thus, Marxism-Leninism emerged as the efficacious ideology for antisystemic activity in the semiperiphery in the beginning of the twentieth century, as its subsequent history has demonstrated.

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Why Stalinism? Again it seems obvious in retrospect. The revolution was the work of a cadre party, by definition as small group. It

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started from the perspective that its task was politically very difficult since it presumed the relentless opposition of the local and the world bourgeoisie to its efforts. And indeed this presumption was confirmed by the experience of the Soviet Union, not only in the first few years after 1917 but subsequently.

In addition to civil war and foreign intervention, Russia was a war-devastated country whose economic strength was not all that great in the first place. Just holding the state together was a monu-

What is the big question-mark, if one retraces Soviet history today, is whether the Bolsheviks would not have been better served by a different attitude towards the peasantry. Clearly, forced collectivization was a critical decision and a turning-point, creating a situation which still has repercussions today. But was it inevitable, or even wise? Marxist culture had certainly ill-prepared socialists anywhere to develop a politically intelligent stance towards the peasantry. They were, in the famous and infamous phrase of Marx, "a sack of potatoes." Lenin, one might have thought, could have done better. He was, after all, the author of an excellent analysis of

the development of rural social relations in late Tsarist Russia. He had at least studied the peasantry, unlike Marx. But he was too caught up in the manipulative policies of a professional revolutionary to translate his somewhat academic study into lessons for political tactics. Did even Lenin really believe in NEP?

The fact is that Russia was a semiperipheral country, and its leadership (and here there is a continuity from von Witte to Stalin)

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defined its world-economic priority as the rapid industrialization of the country. Lenin's slogan that "Communism equals socialism plus electricity" continued to hang in a big banners in Moscow until a very few years ago. The whole leadership believed in the "socialist accumulation of capital," and would boast up to the 1980's about their great success in pursuing this objective. If steel fac-

have been correct, but they persuaded many and in an important sense gave Stalinism some popular legitimacy. The period of the Great Patriotic War of course reinforced this legitimacy mightily.

Furthermore, there was a second external support we should not forget. We all presume too blithely that there was a shift in U.S. policy towards the U.S.S.R. from the accomodation of Roosevelt to the Cold War hostility of Truman and

careful to see what they did. There is no question that the U.S.S.R. and the occupying Red Army brought to power Communist parties in six states where they could not have made it otherwise, either by elections or by insurrection. The six are of course Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the German Democratic Republic.

I think the explanation of these actions are simple and even mundane. First, the U.S.S.R. feared a possible U.S. military action against it and a resurrection of Germany, and wished to strengthen its military position. This was in fact a total misreading of U.S. strategy, but it was nonetheless believed. Secondly, the U.S.S.R. wished (and economically needed) war reparations, and felt that the only way they could be sure to get them was by taking them. And thirdly, the U.S.S.R. actually feared the potential strength (and therefore independence) of indigenous Communist movements, and wished to ensure that the east European parties would be satellite parties.

Of course, this mode of installing Communist parties in power was bound to uproot whatever legitimacy they had as of 1945. The only possible (and temporary) exception was Czechoslovakia, where the Communist party had some genuine local strength. The purges of 1948-49 were indeed anti-nationalist, not anti-bourgeois-nationalist, but anti-Communist-nationalist. With the purges, the

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tories are the be-all and end-all of socialist planning, then there cannot be too much sympathy for the plight of a peasantry that was being confiscated and proletarianized. An occasional tactical retreat, yes; a basic accomodation, never!

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Stalinism was further abetted by geopolitics. In the 1933-41 period, it was clearly the case that both Germany and the Western trio (U.S., U.K., France) were maneuvering to see if there were some way they could destroy the Soviet state. Stalin's argument that his policies were defensive against an external and powerful enemy, and were the only possible way to defend the Soviet state, may not

his successors. I disagree. It seems to me U.S. policy was a continuous one, behind the change in rhetoric. The U.S. wanted a Stalinist U.S.S.R. with a mini-empire, provided it remained essentially within the 1945-48 borders. Stalinism served the U.S. as ideological justification of and cement for its hegemony in the world-system. Stalinism was a moderating, not an exacerbating, influence on worldwide antisystemic forces. Stalinism guaranteed order in a third of the world, and the U.S.S.R. could in that sense be thought of as playing the role of a "subimperialist" power for the U.S. From a U.S. point of view, everything about the U.S.S.R. has been going downhill since the death of Stalin. Witness the current deep embarrassment that the Gorbechev phenomenon is causing the U.S.

Deutscher should get enormous credit for the basic vision, but he turned out to be only partially right. What Deutscher had predicted came into practice as Khrushchevism, and Khrushchevism was a failure. Khrushchev was a failure not because he had an excitable temperament, but because he was still wedded to and believed profoundly in the developmentalism that had always been the basis of Soviet economic policy.

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Why did the U.S.S.R. create an "empire" after 1945? Let us be

fig leaf was off, and it was only a matter of time that nationalist (and therefore anti-Soviet) senti-

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ment would resurface in politically efficacious form.

By contrast, the U.S.S.R. and the Red Army had nothing to do with the coming to power of Communist guerilla movements in Yugoslavia, Albania, and China. And it is therefore no accident that all three Communist governments had rather spectacular open breaks with the U.S.S.R. in the postwar period. None of the three were ever satellites, and could not be said to have been part of a Soviet "empire." For a short while, they were allies, but no more. Stalin understood that from the beginning. That is why he advised the Chinese CP to come to terms with the Kuomintang, advice that was ignored. That is why he scotched the beginnings of a Yugoslav-Bulgarian federation that Dimitrov was trying to promote. And that is of course the reason why Soviet troops withdrew from northern Iran in 1946 and the U.S.S.R. scuttled the Greek Communist insurrection in 1947. Stalin was not merely not in favour or, but positively opposed to, the coming to power of indigenous, nationally legitimate Communist parties.

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To be sure, the "empire" has turned out to be burden as well as benefit, but not a burden of which the U.S.S.R. could so easily divest itself. After 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, we have come to talk of a Brezhnev doctrine, meaning the immutability of satellite status. Should we not rather call it the Brezhnev-Johnson doctrine? Did not Lyndon Johnson give Brezhnev the necessary assurances? And if so, why? The answer seems to me clear. The U.S. wanted the U.S.S.R. to continue to assume (for both good and ill) the burden of empire, and certainly did not wish to take the

risks of disorder and the economic costs of assistance of successful desatellization. Johnson delayed the inevitable for 20 years. George Bush is squirming today before the difficulties caused by a desatellization at last in process.

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Why de Stalinization? It seems a crazy question today. Who likes

We can regard perestroika and glasnost as a conjunctural response to a general dilemma, and indeed I have just in effect described it in this way. But it is more than that. In the guise of a return to Leninism, it is an attempt by the elites to regroup in the wake of the collapse worldwide of (Marxism-) Leninism as an ideology and a strategy.

Stalinism? Obviously, everyone would want to change it. We have to remind ourselves that, as recently as the mid-1980's, there were many analysts outside and within the socialist countries that thought this was an impossible idea. There were even people who argued that Khrushchev's speech and the Sino-Soviet split were mere tricks, or illusions. In 1953, Isaac Deutscher began to write in the weeks after Stalin's death a book forecasting "a break with the Stalin era." As he tells us in the Foreword: "My friends, among

them eminent students of Soviet affairs; shook their heads skeptically." 2 The heart of Deutscher's prognosis lay in one sentence: "The economic progress made during the Stalin era has at last brought within the reach of the people a measure of well-being which should make possible an orderly winding up of Stalinism and a gradual democratic evolution." 3

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by the year 2000, he told Americans. It seems farcical now. It did not however seem farcical then, and we should analyze why. The remark was made during the period of incredible expansion of the capitalist world-economy that ran from circa 1945-1967. Everyone was "developing" then, but some were doing better than others. The growth rates in the Comecon countries were remarkable, and projected forward the U.S.S.R. might have "caught up" with the U.S., if not by 2000, then a decade or two later.

These growth rates, furthermore, were not high in comparison to the countries in the core, but looked particularly good when matched against countries in the Third World. Of course, Japan also had remarkable growth rates, but in the 1950's few noticed this. Soviet developmentalism therefore was not merely a source of pride to the Communist parties in power but a beacon for the national liberation movements of the Third World. In the 1950's belief in the Soviet Union as a model of economic development was widespread, albeit of course never universal. And the explanation given for this success, particularly but not exclusively in the Third World, was the efficacy of Leninism. I say Leninism rather than Marxism-Leninism, because partly out

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of expediency partly out of cultural resistance, many Third World movements preferred to import the Leninism (particularly the party structures and the state planning) without importing the Marxism (particularly the concept of an internal class struggle and the Europocentrism).

some political liberalization and some consumerism, Khrushchev vastly underestimated the demand. It has long been a truism of sociological analysis that it is easier for a state to be totally repressive than to offer a small but inadequate amount of space for political and cultural pluralism.

to be aware of the discrepancies. Of course, this was less severe in more efficient economies like the GDR and Czechoslovakia, but even there it was but a matter of time for there to be insufficient surplus to meet politically-real demand.

When the downturn in the world-economy came, the economic processes in the socialist countries were not all that different from that of the Third World. In the 1970's, some countries benefited from oil rent, and the U.S.S.R. was among them. Western financial institutions pressed loans upon all these countries in order to maintain world effective demand, and not a few socialist countries became among the largest per capita debtors, to suffer in the 1980's from a radical inability service the debt, much less to repay it (or if to repay it, to do so at the incredible human and social cost that Rumania has incurred). And socialist countries, no less than Third World countries, found themselves in great difficulty to sell their products on the world market, to be "competitive" in the current jargon. Hence, the socialist countries no less than the Third World countries suffered from inflationary pressures and a declining standard of living. Like most of the Third World countries, the socialist countries began to seek refuge in (were pressed to seek refuge in) a liberalization of their markets. And like most Third World countries, the increased opening to the market by the socialist countries has at best only slightly alleviated their economic difficulties.

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I believe myself that we must reassess the socialist experiences conducted under the aegis of Marxism-Leninism, seeing them primarily as an historically-comprehensible but transient phenomenon in the historical development of the modern world-system. It is not that they have failed. The term "failure" assumes that there were plausible historical alternatives.

Khrushchev was not innovating in being a developmentalist; he was in fact continuing the legacy of Stalin and Lenin. His innovation came in seeking to represent the interest of the cadres of the Soviet system who wanted two things: assurance against terrorism, and increased consumerism. His naïvete in the end was to think that one could control the process of loosening the reins without reforming the basic political structure. Khrushchevism represented a fundamental underestimation of the sociological transformation of the U.S.S.R. as well as misreading of the functioning of the modern world-system. Khrushchevism represented in a way a belief in Soviet rhetoric, a sin of which Stalin was never really guilty.

The senior cadres who wanted what Khrushchev had to offer were appalled once they saw that they might be letting a genie out of the bottle. Brezhnevism represented the attempt to put the genie back in, always as we know a futile attempt. The two elements that Khrushchev did not take into account were the degree of urbanization and transformation of the labor force of the U.S.S.R., and the cyclical rhythms of the capitalist world-economy.

When he opened the possibilities in the U.S.S.R. (and hence in the Comecon countries as well) of

Opening a small space whets the appetite without satisfying it, and emboldens the demand for more. How much space is needed before political calm returns is difficult to estimate, but it is clear Khrushchev offered too little. The Brezhnev solution was obviously to move in reverse direction, without however installing a directly life-threatening terror that would have cast the senior cadres back into fear. Such a reverse policy can work for a while, and did so under Brezhnev, both in the U.S.S.R. and in eastern Europe.

But the even greater error of Khrushchev was to be unaware of how the capitalist world-economy really works. The impressive growth rates were based primarily on an inefficient base of extensive growth with high labor-intensivity. For a while, and as long as the world-economy was expanding, this could result in a growth of GNP, even of GNP per capita. But the inefficiency of the methods meant that they reached a cap, and the increase in standard of living always lagged behind the increase in the core zones in the same period, if not behind that of most peripheral zones.

Sooner or later, the socialist economics could not meet the expectations of improvement of an ever larger stratum of persons who were sufficiently well-informed

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ogy and a strategy. In the process, the U.S.S.R. is at last decolonizing (not only within the socialist camp but also within its own frontiers).

Everyone speaks of Gorbachev's dilemmas: the dilemma of a perestroika that isn't working yet; the dilemma of a glasnost that has not yet gone far enough to satisfy most people but has gone far enough to result in considerable internal turmoil; and finally, the dilemma of a decolonization *octroyee a la de Gaulle*, without the favourable world economic climate from which de Gaulle benefited. All this is true, but in my

were in reality born up to 1968, which I take as the symbolic turning-point in the history of these movements.⁴

The three kinds of movements represented in fact merely three variants of a single strategy: the seizure of state power by a party claiming to incarnate the popular will, and using state power to "develop" the country. This strategy has proved unworkable, but it was not possible to appreciate this in 1870 or even in 1945. The movements should not be faulted for being products of the historical limitations of their times. But we are now living in a different climate.

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view secondary. Gorbachev's main dilemma is that he hasn't got an alternative ideology and strategy to substitute for the defunct Marxism-Leninism. He is to be sure an excellent tactician. He is indeed liquidating that cold war single-handedly, and thereby doing more to guarantee world and Soviet evolution in a positive direction than any other contemporary leader. But in the end, what has happened to the socialist project?

I believe myself that we must reassess the socialist experiences conducted under the aegis of Marxism-Leninism, seeing them primarily as an historically-comprehensible but transient phenomenon in the historical development of the modern world-system. It is not that they have failed. The term "failure" assumes that there were plausible historical alternatives. I believe there were no such plausible alternatives to the social-democracy that emerged in the Western world, the Marxism-Leninism that took hold in the U.S.S.R. and China at least, and to the national liberation movements that came to power in the Third World. This whole process can be said to cover a period of a century or so between the 1870's when these movements

Rene Dumont has said: *Fini les lendemains qui chantent.*⁵ I do not believe myself however that utopianism is at an end. Quite the contrary. Perhaps it is only now that we can invent utopian utopias. ⁶

The construction of socialism in this world, if it is to occur, is still before us - as option, but scarcely as certainty. The so-called real existing socialist experiences can teach us much by negative example and a little by positive example. It is well to remember that in the end Marxism-Leninism functioned in reality more as an ideology of national development than as an ideology of socialist construction. National development is however essentially an illusory concept within the framework of a capitalist world-economy.⁷ It will never be achieved, even in a partial way, by most countries. The reason that Marxism-Leninism is becoming defunct today as an ideology is because all developmentalist ideologies are becoming defunct.

Marxism however did not start out as an ideology of national development, and is not doomed to be understood only in this constrictive fashion. There are other

possible readings of Marx. And in the coming decades there can be, probably will be, much further thinking and praxis that may permit us to arrive at a new ideological consensus, a new scientific epistemology, a new historiography that will incorporate Marx's fundamental insights and values and, in a Marxist way, go beyond them to a new *Aufhebung* that may permit the construction of a more democratic, more legalitarian world.

Notes

1. Edward Hallett Carr, *The Soviet Impact on the Western World* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 105.
2. Isaac Deutscher, *Russia, what Next?* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953), p. v.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
4. See my "1968, Revolution in the World-System: Theses and Queries," forthcoming in *Theory and Society*.
5. Paris: Seuil, 1983.
6. I have previously discussed the relation between Marxisms and utopias in my "Marxisms as Utopias: Evolving Ideologies," *American Journal of Sociology*, XCI, 6, May 1986, 1295-1308. In that article, I argued:

Utopia are always ideological. Here Engels (and Marx) was right, provided one remembers that they were wrong in the implicit utopia involved in believing that there could ever be an end to history, a world in which ideologies no longer existed. If we are to make progress, it seems to me we have not only to accept contradiction as the key to explain social reality but also to orthodox Marxism. Contradiction is the human condition. Our utopia has to be sought not in eliminating all contradiction but in eradicating the vulgar, brutal, unnecessary consequences of material inequality. This latter seems to me intrinsically a quite achievable objective. (p. 1307)
7. I argue this in some detail in "Development: Lodestar or Illusion?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, XXIII, 39, Sept. 24, 1988, 2017-23.