

Sebastian Berg: Intellectual Radicalism After 1989. Crisis and Re-Orientation in the British and the American Left, Bielefeld: Transkript 2016, 344 S.

Reviewed by
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As a significant study and measured intellectual history of Marxist theory and socialist discourse bleeding out of mainstream Leftist journals in response to the geopolitical collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent demise of the Eastern Bloc, *Intellectual Radicalism After 1989* clinically refuses to indulge in any grand pronouncements akin to Francis Fukuyama's infamous claim of the 'end of history'.¹ Instead, Sebastian Berg exhibits an analytical temperament of numbing glacial objectivity as he tediously mines a vast array of epistemological tensions and political apologetics engaged in by the mainstream Left to account for its historic failure at consummating and sustaining an authentic socialist political project within Western Europe or the United States.

To be clear, the value of this work lies not in its novelty, but rather in Berg's remarkable achievement of meticulously cataloging oppositional thought, as exemplified and filtered through the political orientations and theoretical trajectories of *New Left Review* and *Socialist Register* in Great Britain and *Monthly Review* and *Dissent* in the United States, against the globalized tide of advanced neo-liberal capitalist

hegemony. However, Berg is extremely careful in refusing to confront the historical crisis of orthodox Leftist perspectives that he surveys head on. Rather, his prose discloses a deconstructive methodology which, "considering the narrative intention of the texts, it nevertheless reads them with questions in mind that are in many cases different from the questions the writers addressed in their articles and from the purposes their texts served" (p. 17). This strategy has the effect, desired or not, of allowing the editorial decisions and theoretical preoccupations of such notable figures like Irving Howe, Paul Sweezy, Perry Anderson, and Ralph Miliband to ultimately contribute towards a quieting condemnation of whatever combined vestiges of Marxist theory and socialist democracy they still creatively endorsed in the immediate aftermath of the political dissolution of Soviet style nation-state communism in 1989.

Of key importance to understanding the scope of this work is a fundamental paradox introduced into Leftist thought by the failed project of Soviet communism particularly to radical orientations existing in Western Europe and the United States. For as Berg asserts, "this constitutes a paradox because Western Marxism in most of its shades had for a long time distanced itself from really existing socialism" (p. 7). Indeed, can anyone really dispute that Western Marxism had been at least consistently critical, if not openly hostile to "really existing socialism" (p. 7), be it manifest in closed social formations of Eastern Europe or within open social formations of the imperial mainstream in Western metropolises? As such, Berg's study presents enough evidentiary momentum

towards suggesting that the geopolitical trajectory of socialist projects themselves lent even more historical credence to a discursive abandonment of once untouchable dogmatic pillars of Marxist theory. The lived implausibility of economic determinism, dialectical materialism, and blind messianic faith in the working-class as the singular motor of linear historical progress thus fueled Post-Marxism as poststructuralist inflected reconfigurations that ultimately obscure if not completely abandon such blatant theoretical vulnerabilities of Marxist thought.

What eventually comes to the fore, however, is a disconcerting geopolitical complicity of Marxism, which though in historical opposition to capital, finds itself alarmingly at peace with Empire, or as Marx himself discloses, “in fact the veiled slavery of the wage labourers in Europe needed the unqualified slavery of the New World as its pedestal.”²

As such, fundamental to this Post-Marxist orientation is a quietist resignation to the parliamentary democratic simulacrum of a civil society that is predicated upon racist dehumanization and coloniality.³ As Berg’s work notably documents, “Marxism’s anti-imperialist internationalism has been replaced by an acceptance of the capitalist world system which again can only be changed incrementally” (p. 44). Post-Marxism thus indulges in a cathartic liberal disavowal of the revolutionary human agency required to overthrow unjust structural-inert power, as inherently totalitarian. Of course, then, “it follows from this approach that the traditional Marxist conception of revolution has run its course” (p. 43).

A question never the less arises to the astute reader. In what sense then can such contemporary orientations of Marxism still be considered radical? Or if we are to take DuBois⁴ seriously, or even Foucault⁵, just how radical was Marxism itself in relation to modernity as imposed by western imperialist power? Berg himself accurately captures this tension as “between radical critique and moderate recommendations” (p. 309) which is damning in its accurate depiction of the obvious stalemate which encompasses any claim to radicalism within the imperial mainstream to say the least. Intellectual Radicalism after 1989 is a scholarly testament to Berg’s clear-sighted devotion to the primacy of empirical research as he compiles an impressive array of theoretical wreckage and geopolitical failure as aspirations towards a socialism, which by its sheer historical emphasis on a materialist causality, never actually materializes in history. And yet, simultaneously implicit in the work itself is an unremitting persistence of Marxist critique as an emancipatory imperative of redemption within modernity itself as a concerted systematic opposition to the contemporary behemoth of globalized capital.

However, was it not Sartre who warned us explicitly, that “you cannot, with impunity, form generations of men by imbuing them with successful, but false, ideas. What will happen if materialism stifles the revolutionary design to death one day?”⁶ If we are too follow the epistemological implications of Berg’s work, indeed, it would seem that such a day is now upon us.

Notes

- 1 F. Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, New York 1992.

- 2 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, New York [1867] 1990, p. 925.
- 3 A. Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America", in: M. Morana, E. Dussel, and C. A. Juaregui (eds.), *Coloniality at Large*, Durham 2008, pp. 181–224.
- 4 "Modern imperialism and modern industrialism are one and the same system; root and branch of the same tree. The race problem is the other side of labor problem; ... remembering always that empire is the heavy hand of capital abroad ... this almost naïve setting of the darker races beyond the pale of democracy and of modern humanity ... involves two things – acquiescence of the darker peoples and agreement between capital and labor in white democracies." W. E. B. DuBois, "The Negro Mind Reaches Out", in: *The New Negro*, ed. by A. Locke, New York [1925] 1992, pp. 386, 402. Emphasis mine.
- 5 "At the deepest level of Western knowledge, Marxism introduced no real discontinuity; it found its place without difficulty, as a full, quiet, comfortable and, goodness knows, satisfying form for a time (its own), within an epistemological arrangement that welcomed it gladly (since it was this arrangement that was in fact making room for it) and that it, in return, had no intention of disturbing and, above all, no power to modify, even one jot, since it rested entirely upon it." M. Foucault, *The Order of Things*, New York 1966, 1994, p. 261.
- 6 J.-P. Sartre, *Materialism and Revolution, Literary and Philosophical Essays*, New York 1946, 1962, p. 256.