

# Marx in '71: The Heavenly City of the 20th-Century Philosophers

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My title comes, of course, from Carl Becker's poignant and ironic book on the utopian thinkers of the Enlightenment. The poignancy in Becker's work came from his sympathy for their ideal of a society transformed, a mankind fulfilled. The irony came from his pained perception that these eighteenth-century thinkers had made things absurdly easy for themselves, by supposing that the order of nature—correctly understood—contained the code for a benign society, without ancient tyrannies and traditional terrors. The optimism and self-confidence of the Enlightenment have long since vanished. Anguish, even desperation, mark the writings of the contemporary heirs of the Enlightenment, the Western European Marxists. The revolution seems always to recede over the historical horizon. It is far too early for another Becker to record their chronicle. History may, in the end, show them to be at least as successful as their spiritual ancestors and perhaps more so. I wonder, however, whether they may be imitating the eighteenth-century in one important respect.

The Enlightenment philosophers held that the new social order was implied by the old natural order. The modern Marxists scrutinize our society to find new revolutionary forces—or old ones come back to life. This is perfectly in accord with Marx's own method. He held that mankind would revolutionize its conditions of existence when it was ready to do so, and not a minute before. The moral critique of capitalism, the perception of its pervasive spiritual disorder, could not replace the maturation of an effective revolutionary force. The old historical order, in other words, must produce the new one. Suppose, however, that in our own time there is no effective

revolutionary force. In that case, Marxism would become a spiritual choice, one political option amongst others, one contender for supremacy in a world of multiple historical possibilities.

And that is precisely what Western European Marxism has become. For some Marxists, however, a recognition of their situation would disturb all of their thought. For others, it is a source of creative tension. Beneath the surface of much contemporary Marxism, though, one project dominates: the search for a new self-understanding. A twentieth-century location for a doctrine inherited from the nineteenth is urgent—the more so as we are rapidly passing into the twenty-first century. History, meanwhile, does not wait. The theorists may propose but politics disposes. The uniqueness of Marxism is, however, its relationship to politics, to the daily stuff of conflict. Marxism is about politics, but it is also of politics. The Marxists describe what is happening, and they also prescribe what should be done, justify what has been done.

The Marxists, then, feel two very different sorts of pressure. The *first* is contemplative and intellectual. It has to do with Marxism as a description of society, with matters like the philosophical status of Marxism, the nature of modern capitalism, the new divisions of society into classes, the changed role of the state. It also concerns the future of a vision of human nature originally Promethean: Did not Marxism in its original form suppose that men could entirely remake history? The *second* sort of pressure does concern the making of history—but not always in a Promethean way. These questions deal with the organization of socialist parties, their alliances, their search for a tactical program not impossibly at odds with a long-term socialist strategy. Here, the Marxists face hard political choices. In Italy, should they support the Communist Party as it converts itself to a reformist counter-church, a power in the land? Or should they back the groups to its left, which now

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claim to be the true legatees of Italy's socialist tradition? Or should they work with the two socialist parties unhappily ensconced in governmental apparatus? In France, in Germany, in Scandinavia, different choices present themselves—and they are real choices. There are even choices in the state socialist regimes, including the Soviet Union. Should the libertarian Marxists go over entirely to opposition, or should they enter upon a limited collaboration with the politicians and technocrats who claim to represent the revolution accomplished?

The two sets of pressures are different, but they are related. Theoretic reflection sets limits to political choice—and political choice, in turn, can shape reflection. It would be astonishing if it were otherwise, with a doctrine which—after all—claims to represent a union of theory and practice. In fact, the claim is refuted by the reality. Different schemes of Marxist thought seem to generate alternative approaches to Marxist politics. Let me set aside, for some pages, the excitements and complications of socialist politics in modern Europe. I shall stay with Marxist theory and turn to the actual texture of history afterward.

As I write, I have on my desk three books. One is by an Italian, Roberto Guiducci, *Dopo Marx (After Marx)*. The other is by the French philosopher Louis Althusser, *Pour Marx (For Marx)*. The third is by French philosopher-sociologist Raymond Aron, *Marxismes imaginaires (The Imaginary Marxisms)*. The Italian argues that recent social changes make it necessary to go beyond Marx if we wish to understand modern society. The French philosopher holds that only a correct reading of the original Marxist texts can give us a universally valid method for understanding society. The French sociologist supposes that in the end it makes no difference. For reasons of their own, contemporary Marxists can and do make anything they want out of the classical texts, so that even the most improbable versions of Marxism can claim canonical standing. In one respect, at least, Aron is right. The European bookshops are full of Marxist books. The original texts stand side by side with commentaries upon them. The founders of Marxism join their descendants, from Lukacs and Lenin to Adorno and Mao. Tomes on Marxist esthetics support rows on the relationship between Marxism and the natural sciences. Freudianism and Christianity vie for re-interpretation in Marxist terms. Movements of national liberation in the Third World and for sexual liberation in our own contend for space. Studies of the factory and the condition of the working class adjoin inquiries into the students and the newer, salaried strata of the labor force. Our culture is in fragments. Marxism claims to possess an interpretation of the whole. If Marxist politics cannot give us a true community, Marxist theory can, at least, try to tell us why ours is rent asunder. We confront, however, not a unified Marxist theory but an

entire series of contending interpretations of Marxism. I have described the ensuing clash of ideas as anguished, and it is certainly that. It is also no little confused, marked by not entirely dialectical unions of opposites, rhetorical excess and (sometimes) grammatical impoverishment. Withal, some of the main themes of debate are clear enough. Seemingly abstract, often academic, invariably conceptual, these themes do contain a very considerable amount of political matter. I shall begin with three themes.

Dwight MacDonald once described academic socialists as “professors of revolution”—and implied that the aridity of their thought was in direct proportion to their isolation from a real social movement. There are many Marxist professors in Europe, and they fit no easy categories. One group, however, is engaged in a search for a Marxist method. The curious thing is that this group quite negates MacDonald's aphorism. They may not be professors of revolution but they are ideologues of political movements quite permanently installed in—or near—power. It is sometimes forgotten by Americans that the French and Italian Communist Parties control important municipal administrations, trade unions, cultural organizations. Marxism has become the ideology of the state and society in Eastern Europe. In Western Europe, a certain kind of Marxism is the ideology of what we may term the institutional opposition (in the Latin countries, the designation counter-church is as good as any). Hence, the point is less to make a revolution than to justify not making one. One way to do so is to concentrate on discussions of method—not political method but conceptual method. Marxism as the theology of a counter-church requires a special kind of justification: as a method valid even in the absence of the total transformation of society it implies. Some may be reminded of the celebrated nineteenth-century remark that mankind waited upon the Kingdom of Heaven and instead got the Roman Catholic Church. I have run ahead of the argument, but let these remarks stand. I recognize, however, that those who debate method would on the whole strenuously deny the truth of these remarks. Some might, indeed, point to the Soviet Union and the Eastern European societies as proofs incarnate of the efficacy of Marxism as a science. Others, with more critical sense—they could hardly have less—argue that the problem of a Marxist method is independent of the immediate influence of politics.

That is, if I have understood it, the position of Louis Althusser. His works have been translated into a number of languages, including our own. They cannot be described as easy reading. Althusser insists on an “epistemological break” in the works of Marx between the humanism of the early writings and the (allegedly) scientific approach of the later ones. Marxism, as he understands it, is not a philosophy of history, much less its empirical description. It is,

rather, the elucidation of structural concepts which make historical analysis possible. Rigorously objective, these concepts alone enable us to understand the data of historical experience. Althusser's understanding of Marxism is so self-consciously analytical that it effectively destroys what Marx depicted as a totality: society as an unconscious creation of mankind. Instead, society appears as a conscious product of philosophical insight. The instruments of insight are the elements of social structure—disembodied, isolated from the human activity which Marx found in even the most distorted and inhuman of social forms. The nineteenth-century prophet wished to free men of alienation. Althusser seems to subjugate mankind to a particular form of alienation. We cannot recognize ourselves in his work, since it propounds a world formed of conceptual elements and abstract relationships.

It is a puzzle that a prominent school of European Marxism should reproduce the remoteness and mechanical quality we sometimes associate with the excesses of the "behavioral sciences." Part of the reason is clear. Cézanne once said that he wanted to make of Impressionism something solid, for the museums. Althusser has made of Marxism something academic, for term papers and schoolmen's controversies. A philosophy of history has become a set of conceptual rules. The French Communist Party, during the last French Presidential elections, received twenty-three per cent of the vote. It can now claim not alone a role in the academy but an official presence there—in the form of a doctrine of method appropriately remote from politics.

Or is it so remote? Althusser and his disciples seem to assume what nearly everyone else doubts, that the Marxist account of the capitalist economy is correct, that a socialist transformation has really occurred in Eastern Europe. They also assume—insofar as they deal with the problem at all—that the Marxist conception of the extraction of surplus value from the working class is correct. This must inevitably lead to contradictions in the system—and, eventually, to a revolution. What these celebrants of method assume, however, is exactly what others are questioning.

European Marxists are now divided by profound differences concerning the nature of capitalism. Some cling to what they suppose are the original Marxist definitions. Only the manual working class produces economic value; all the rest is non-productive work. Since administration, the sciences, art and government are included in the category of non-productive work, it is clear that a good deal is excluded. Most of all, what is excluded is the fastest growing sector of the labor force, the white-collar workers and the technicians, the professionals and the intellectuals, the state bureaucrats. Other Marxists have found reason in the Marxist texts (and, of course, in the everyday reality of Europe) to adopt a rather more comprehensive approach. The new sectors of the

labor force, as they understand it, are indispensable to capitalist production in its modern form. A Marxist analysis of science and technology as forces of production, and of the political potential of the scientists, technologists and technicians, has become a new priority.

It is at this point that Marxist controversy swirls about the student revolt, a controversy stimulated at this moment by the fact that the revolt has moved from the universities into the technical and secondary schools. Is the student revolt a rebellion of the over-privileged, of capitalism's spoiled children? Or do the students constitute the beginnings of a new vanguard, the most educated sectors of the labor force—seeking to use their education for humane ends rather than for the ends of the marketplace? The orthodox Marxists reply that a revolution has to be made by the most exploited, the materially exploited, part of the population—the industrial working class. Their critics' rejoinder is that the nature of exploitation may have changed. This, clearly, is not a matter which can be settled by recourse to method. It is an historical, and a political, question.

So is the question of the state. The French Communist Party has just produced two volumes on "The Monopoly Capitalism of the State." Like its Italian counterpart, it must deal with the phenomenon of a growing state sector in the ostensibly capitalist countries. In Italy, indeed, some Marxists argue that the state technocracy has become more powerful than any other element in society. The Italian Communist Party pushed the nationalization of industry for decades. It now finds that the working class and the unions have to contend with an antagonist with very large means of patronage, opinion manipulation and influence at its disposal. The standard Marxist answer is that state capitalism is an adjunct of private monopoly capitalism. Once the socialist parties gain command of the state apparatus, this alliance will be severed. The economic resources of the state will then be at the disposal of the entire nation. Other Marxists do not share the optimism of the Communist parties. They point to the Eastern European countries as evidence for the absence of a necessary link between state economic power and the realization of true socialism.

**B**ut what is true socialism? It is here that theoretic debate has political implications. I have written of Althusser's attempt to objectify Marxism, to denude it of humanistic philosophical content. The effort is, perhaps, a response to the opposite tendency. For decades, European Marxists have sought to develop a new Marxist humanism. The enormous literature on the famous Paris manuscripts of 1844 testifies to the importance of the concept of alienation in their work. More recently still, Sartre (in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*) has made a conception of an active, a self-transcending

humanity the fundament of his Marxism. Other humanistic tendencies are important. Merleau-Ponty in Paris, a growing group in Italy, and the heretical Communists of the *Praxis* group in Yugoslavia have insisted on a philosophical alliance between Marxism and phenomenology.

The point they are making, I believe, is that even the unhappy or oppressed human consciousness is human. Our beginning point has to be not some objective or mechanical account of history but our own suffering in it, our own perception of our possibilities. We can create a human universe, but we have to recognize that it will be our own—not the product of forces outside of ourselves. And with this recognition goes another postulate. Even socialist society, above all in a period of transition to socialism, will have oppression, exploitation, alienation. The point is not to deny these but to analyze, attack and overcome them. But for these purposes, a libertarian socialism is indispensable: No group or party can claim a monopoly of socialist wisdom. Indeed, the first principle of Marxist humanism in Europe has become the self-critique of Marxism. Volumes of text are not needed to show that this is hardly compatible with the assertion that the regimes of Eastern Europe represent the revolution achieved. For Western European purposes it is not compatible with the claim of the Communist parties that they are organic expressions of the working class.

Here, the philosophical critique of Marxist method merges with the controversy over the nature of capitalism. The Communist parties insist that their working-class character is fundamental. Only the class most injured by capitalism can be expected to persist in the attempt to overthrow it. That class has been largely excluded from access to high culture and to power. The centralized and disciplined organization of the Communist parties, they argue, is essential to the working class if it is to be effective politically. Suppose, however, that different types of exploitation are now central to capitalism. Questions of the environment, of defects in public services, of the quality of life, of meaningful work, seem to mean much to the newer types of worker. Above all, the scientific and technical character of capitalism has grown. The system cannot be changed, then, without the cooperation of the scientific and technical workers. These workers, however, are very unlikely to accept the leadership of Communist parties which insist on rigid political discipline. What would be the point of demanding from the capitalists autonomy for human thought and skill, only to lose it to party bureaucrats? Moreover, the dogmatic insistence of the Communist leaders on the working-class basis of socialism does not make easy the conversion to socialism of those who—rightly or wrongly—think of themselves as different from the industrial workers.

Conflicts about the social forces which could—conceivably—make a revolution are related to the con-

troversy about the capitalist state. The Communist parties of Western Europe are rather like their socialist and social democratic counterparts. All seem to suppose that once they command the state, the transition to socialism can begin. An increasingly vocal socialist opposition has argued that the assumption is terribly wrong. The bureaucratic and hierarchical systems of power in modern society, they hold, should be attacked frontally. Socialist technocrats would not necessarily be a radical improvement upon the present kind. Indeed, in many countries (France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, among others) the state technocrats are frequently socialists. What the socialist opposition wants is a new system for sharing power. This will have to begin with a re-organization of the socialist movement itself, away from centralized parties and unions and toward regional, local and (in factories, offices, schools) institutional councils. The aim of socialism ought not to be the control of the present system of administration and production but its radical transformation.

The experience of socialism outside Western Europe weighs heavily upon the participants in these controversies. All the irrationalities, disorders, scandals, tyrannies and atrocities of Soviet communism are elements in the debate. Equally, the high cost with which socialism's relatively modest achievements in Eastern Europe have been bought colors the argument. Some years ago, Yugoslav socialism exerted a considerable influence on the Western Europeans. Today, it does not. The Yugoslavs have had a good many economic difficulties and have had to export tens of thousands of workers to northern Europe. They have kept their economy going by developing—with no very great concern for national pride or the esthetics of the question—their tourist industry. Their national quarrels are intense, so much so that the Croatian and Serbian Communist Parties are often at each other's throats. Worse yet, their system of workers' councils, of autonomous enterprises, is not without profound ambiguities. The managers, and not the workers, seem to rule. The managers, in turn, are subject to heavy pressure from Yugoslavia's own state and party bureaucracy. When the Yugoslav student revolt exploded in 1968, it took as a slogan the phrase "Down with the red bourgeoisie." Most of all, among Western European intellectuals, the decline of Yugoslav prestige has been a consequence of a certain constriction of theoretical debate in the Yugoslav Communist movement. The fate of the independent Marxist journal *Praxis* is evidence of that.

*Praxis* is the journal of a group of philosophers and social scientists from Zagreb and Belgrade. Its summer conferences on the Adriatic island of Korcula have become famous as gathering places for critical spirits satisfied with no known regime. The editors

of *Praxis* are regarded with considerable ambivalence by the state and the Yugoslav League of Communists. Sometimes they are tolerated, at other times they are harassed—although, in all fairness, it should be said that they do have friends in high places. The *Praxis* group, not surprisingly, sided with the students against the government and the League—and have faced sanctions ever since. The most recent episode occurred early in 1971. *Praxis* published an essay by the Zagreb sociologist Kanagra, who rejected the claim that Yugoslavia was a workers' state. It was, he held, a techno-bureaucratic one. *Praxis* was promptly brought to court. If my information is correct, the accusation was one of slandering the Yugoslav working class and the League of Communists. The court dismissed the charge and the article was printed. In a subsequent case, the journal did not fare so well. It printed the documents of the student movement, and the government moved to have these expunged from its pages. The court acceded to the demand and that issue of *Praxis* has been altered. No one has gone to jail, no one has lost a job—but the episode is not to Yugoslavia's credit. It seems easier, in that country, to say certain things visually (on film) than in other ways. But what kind of socialism is possible if theoretic debate is disallowed, while satire takes the center of the stage?

The most striking recent development in Western European socialism has been the influence of Maoism. China experienced or China imagined? Mainly, of course, the latter. Let us leave aside the tiresome slogans, the Maoist claims to represent a true line of descent from Marx and Lenin. What is most interesting is the influence of the Cultural Revolution upon the Europeans. Some have seen in it a response to their dilemmas about the social role of science and technology, and a justification for the student revolt. The Chinese Cultural Revolution does not regard knowledge and technique as socially neutral; rather, it seeks to re-organize these in terms of new social imperatives. The Maoist practice of disturbing and reshaping production and administrative relations at the base seems to be, in some European eyes, an answer to the bureaucratization of the Soviet regime—and an antidote to the sterility of the Western European socialist and labor movement. It should not be thought that the Cultural Revolution has influenced only the young, or the naive, or those peculiarly addicted to sloganeering. As acute a Marxist theorist as the French thinker André Gorz has begun to ponder its implications. An essay by Gorz in the October issue of *Les Temps Modernes* transposes Maoism into terms of advanced Western socialism. Gorz follows, in this respect, some of the liveliest spirits in the Italian Communist Party who have left it for a new grouping, *Il Manifesto*, which seeks a new conception of revolution.

We are back at the daily stuff of politics. As I write, I have before me too the new program of the

French Communist Party. It has something for everyone, a bit like the legendary American candidate who was against inflation, against deflation, and forflation. It calls for more nationalization but promises protection and support for small and medium enterprises. It pledges itself solemnly to democratic liberties, and even asks for new mechanisms of participation in industry and administration. This abandonment of a tradition which was a singular fusion of Jacobinism and Leninism has been accomplished, if I read correctly, without a backward glance. The document is curiously silent, however, on the quality of life. *Vivre mieux*, it seems to say—but not *vivre différemment*. The Prometheism of Marxism has gone, to be replaced by a glad-handing reformism.

The Italian Communist Party, more powerful and more flexible, is in about the same condition. Presidential elections are approaching and backroom negotiations between the Communists and the Catholics seem to be proceeding apace. On the Left, the critical socialists of the *Manifesto* group have placed the Communists under a drumfire of criticism. The burden of their charge is that the Party has gone over to reformism, to working within the system, just as the system gives every evidence of coming down on everyone's head. *Manifesto's* influence is enormous. I have in my mind an image I recollect from earlier this week when I attended a theoretical conference sponsored by the Communist Party in Rome. Its deputy secretary-general, Enrico Berlinguer, was in his seat—stoically allowing waves of Marxist rhetoric to break over him. Behind him, a young militant was reading *Manifesto*, the daily newspaper of the opposition.

Meanwhile, other news comes from northern Europe. The German Federal Chancellor has not only gained a Nobel Prize. His party, the German Social Democrats, has won a striking electoral victory in Bremen. It may be on its way, like its Austrian counterpart, to becoming the majority party in the country. The Social Democrats are back in government in Copenhagen. With one million unemployed in Britain, the Labour Party—the ineptitude of its leaders notwithstanding—may again soon be in office. Hegel, it will be recalled, wrote of the *List der Vernunft*, the Ruse of Reason. Perhaps we have one before our eyes. Europe's Communists and Marxists argue profoundly about reform and revolution. The Social Democrats—less anxious to claim descent from Marx but offspring all the same—are actually government parties in a good part of Western Europe. Their policies are cautious, pragmatic. The French and Italian Communist Parties seem to aspire to little else, whatever their rhetoric, than a chance to show that they too can be tedious in office. Yet tedious as they may appear, the Social Democratic regimes have some considerable achievements to their credit. The extension of welfare, the

beginnings of a democratization of social institutions like the educational system and the industrial enterprises, a more rational allocation of economic resources, are far from major alterations in human history. They may even enable a form of capitalism to function more efficiently, because more humanly tolerable. But suppose, given the weight of history, that this is the best any regime can do? We in America, after all, would consider a Social Democratic program a utopia. The young in Europe, and that large number of adults with socialist convictions, do not find this thought much consolation.

Outside the mainstream of the Communist and socialist parties, the students and the extra-parliamentary opposition continue their work. Some developments are significant, like the wave of rebellion which swept through Germany's technical schools some while ago, and which has now engulfed most of the Italian social system. In both cases, the students have demanded a share in running their institutions. More, they have formulated their own programs for a modest but definite Cultural Revolution. They ask that instruction be modified, to prepare them for a share in directing society—not to train them as technicians. And they have sought an alliance with the more radical of the unionists.

Interesting things are happening with some of the unions. In Italy, the large metal workers' union (FIOM) is initiating experiments in factory councils.

In some places, like Fiat, its sections are struggling for equality of wages. In France, no force is more uncompromisingly and effectively radical than the CFDT, the once-Catholic union. It demands not alone better wages and conditions but a share in management. The German metal workers' union, even if connected with the government, is not all that far behind. It is impossible to say whether these diverse tendencies will ever constitute a new model of European socialism. But there is little else on the horizon.

That, precisely, seems to be the difficulty. Marx never provided a blueprint for a transition to socialism—much less for a transition to socialism from an advanced capitalist economy. The Eastern European model is both repellent and ineffective. The Chinese model has interesting aspects, but these have to be recast in European terms. The European Marxists, then, are on their own. In the circumstances, Marxism has become a vast and ill-defined conceptual field in which all kinds of imaginary experiments are possible. From imaginary experiment to concrete political program seems to be, as always in the history of socialism, a labor of Sisyphus. No wonder that the more sensitive Marxists have turned, for some time, to a reconsideration of the historical role of religion. In a world of intractable historical fact, Marxism now seems like the latest—and not the least promising—of religions. The revolution, however, seems to wait for another day.