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MARXISM IN DARK TIMES

Select Essays for the New Century

Sobhanlal Datta Gupta



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For those
who think differently

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Preface

The current global economic crisis, which originated in the West, has triggered a revival of interest in Marxism on a scale which was quite unthinkable even very recently. At the same time there remains the tremendous intellectual apathy for doctrinaire Marxism, associated normally with the practitioners of the mainstream Left. This prompted me to work on this select volume of 16 essays, written over a period of about three decades. The essays are reflective of different moods, times and situations, as they have witnessed both the closure of an old order in the last century and the birth of the new millennium. Despite thematic diversities, the essays question the ontological claims of the kind of Marxism which has dominated the mindset of the common man for decades, resulting in a complete disillusionment after the fall of the Soviet bloc. In its place, a case is made through the essays for an alternative perspective and an understanding marked by the spirit of pluralism, democracy and humanism. That times have changed and that the new century makes new demands—and that it is imperative to take a stock of the history of Marxism afresh, without being trapped in dogmatism—constitutes the central focus of the essays.

Most of the essays have been published previously. However, some of them are being published here for the first time. In the case of the published essays the year of publication has been mentioned at the end of the article. For stylistic reasons as well as factual accuracy some of the published essays have been marginally modified in respect of their titles and content.

The manuscript has been copy-edited and prepared for the press by Rita Banerjee within the stipulated time. I thank her very warmly in recognition of her professional expertise.

I am thankful to the anonymous peer reviewers who made valuable recommendations for improvement of the manuscript. In arranging the essays their suggestions have been kept in mind.

The Anthem Press authorities initiated me in this project. For me it has been a truly fruitful engagement. I remain grateful to Janka Romero, the

development editor, and her team for finally enabling me to come out with this volume.

The errors of commission or omission, if any, lie, of course, with the author alone.

Sobhanlal Datta Gupta
Kolkata
31 October 2011

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“The *Communist Manifesto* after 150 Years: Some Reflections,” *West Bengal Political Science Review* 1–2 (January–December 1998).

“Rosa Luxemburg’s Vision of Socialism: Some Reflections,” *Society and Change* 14, nos. 1–4 (2008–09).

“Antonio Gramsci and the Heritage of Marxism,” *Socialist Perspective* 16, nos. 1–2 (June–September 1988).

“Contrasting Perspectives of International Communism on the Working Class Movement: 1924–1934,” *Socialist Perspective* 24, nos. 3–4 (December 1996–March 1997).

“*Perestroika* and Socialism: Promises and Problems,” *Society and Change* 5, no. 4 (July–September 1988).

“Marxism in Dark Times: Rediscovering a Revolutionary Legacy,” *Mainstream* 39, no. 47 (10 November 2001).

“Marxism, Modernity and History: Towards an Alternative Understanding,” *Man and Development* 24, no. 1 (March 2002).

“Marxism and Postmodernism: Confrontation or Dialogue?” (Kolkata: Society and Change, 2001).

“Intellectuals, Knowledge and the Masses: A Question of Pedagogy,” *Lecture Programme I to IV, 2007–2008* (Kolkata: Indian Association for Asian & Pacific Studies, 2008).

“Marxism in the 21st Century: Towards a New Understanding?” *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 4 (December 2002).

A Note on Translations

Materials in Russian, Italian and German have been used in some of the essays. At different stages the translations from Russian have been made by Pranab Ghosh (deceased), Nilanjana Basu and Harish Chandra Gupta. The translation from Italian was made by Indrani Tomar. My heartfelt thanks go to all of them. The German texts have been translated by the author himself.

List of Abbreviations

CC	Central Committee
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
CI	Communist International
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CPSU(B)	Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolshevik)
CP USA	Communist Party of USA
ECCI	Executive Committee of the Communist International
INKOPP	Internationale Nachrichten der Kommunistischen Opposition
ISA	Ideological State Apparatus
KPD	Communist Party of Germany
KPD(O)	Communist Party of Germany (Opposition)
MEGA	Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe
MEI	Marx-Engels Institute
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs
PCI	Communist Party of Italy
RCP(B)	Russian Communist Party (Bolshevik)
RSDLP	Russian Social Democratic Labour Party
SPD	Social Democratic Party of Germany
USPD	Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany
VKP(b)	All-Union Communist Party (Bolshevik)

Introduction

The essays in this volume cover a period of about thirty years, namely, the last two decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the new millennium. Marked by a complex set of events, this has been a period of transition of Marxism from a rather ossified to a more flexible and open understanding. This was a time which witnessed the birth of a new kind of interpretation of socialism generated from within the Soviet bloc, identified with Mikhail Gorbachev's ambitious programme of *perestroika* and *glasnost*. Suddenly it appeared that Marxism had entered a new age, coming up with a great promise for the future. This, however, did not happen. By 1991, as the Soviet Union, together with the East European bloc, crumbled, Marxism seemed to have entered a period of unprecedented crisis across the globe. This swing of the pendulum of history put Marxism on trial, raising questions concerning its very existence, relevance and future. The situation became particularly complex when, by the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new century, it was evident that the rise of postmodernism was a new and powerful challenge to the universalist claims of Marxism. Besides, the crisis of Marxism sparked off new debates relating to Stalinism and its democratic alternative, recognition of the revolutionary-humanist currents in the Marxist tradition, associated with figures like Antonio Gramsci and Rosa Luxemburg, who have been traditionally considered as representatives of Western Marxism and excluded from the purview of official Marxism.

The last three decades, therefore, witnessed a paradoxical situation. The crisis of Marxism gave birth to feelings of gloom and despair among those who refused to part with their traditional mindset. They either became increasingly sceptical of the claims of Marxism or simply continued to reiterate their old faith by clinging to their age-old doctrinaire understanding. But there was a different response too, which was visible not so much among the practitioners of Marxism but predominantly among those intellectuals who were relatively more open and flexible in their thinking. For many of them the crisis of Marxism had freed it from its political trappings, and it was now possible for the first time to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of this doctrine. The opening

of the archives of the Soviet era further facilitated their efforts. Exploring the Marxist legacy in a situation that was otherwise quite unfavourable thus became a fascinating as well as a challenging exercise for those who were prepared to think differently. The essays selected for this volume are reflective of this temper. They were written as the horizon gradually darkened; yet it had an enabling effect on the author.

Understandably, the themes of the essays are diverse. Nevertheless, they are closely related. For the convenience of reading the sixteen essays which figure in this volume have been arranged in two parts, namely, “Marxism: Beyond Dogma, an Alternative Quest” and “Marxism: Challenges and Possibilities in the New Century.” The running spirit of the essays is the search for an alternative Marxism guided by the concern for pluralism, democracy and humanism.

Under the first group of ten essays the opening piece “The *Communist Manifesto* after 150 Years: Some Observations” was written commemorating the 150th year of publication of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, touching upon three issues, namely, the question of authorship of this canonical text in the light of new research findings; the positions of Marx and Engels concerning the relevance of the *Manifesto*; the complexities involved in the method of reading the *Manifesto* in today’s world. What the essay tries to emphasize is that in the present age the validity of this text lies in the rigorous exploration of its meaning, the focus of which is on anti-statism. Besides, a proper reading of this classic text of Marxism demands the understanding that Marx and Engels never considered this work as something frozen in time. Rather they considered it as a text that was marked by an element of fluidity, as evident in the numerous prefaces to the *Manifesto*.

The second essay “Rosa Luxemburg’s Vision of Socialism: Some Reflections” highlights the non-traditional outlook of Rosa Luxemburg’s views on socialism in the light of a number of controversies involving her complex relationship with the legacy of mainstream Marxism. Broadly speaking, these refer to the Lenin-Luxemburg controversy on the issue of centralism in party organization; her alleged Menshevism, which came to be branded as “Luxemburgism” in the Stalin era, leading to a virtual ban on her writings; finally, her reflections on the Russian Revolution, which intensified the Bolshevik criticism of Rosa Luxemburg after Lenin’s death. The focal point of the essay is that, while she has not left behind any blueprint of how the socialist society has to be built, her vision of socialism, marked by a spirit of dissent, was quite different from the conventional and stereotyped understanding of socialism as an ideology. The clues to this alternative understanding are scattered throughout her writings and its uniqueness lies in her concern for free will, subjectivity, an enlightened working class and pluralism.

The third essay “Antonio Gramsci and the Heritage of Marxism” was written on the occasion of the fiftieth death anniversary of Gramsci. It provides an overview of Antonio Gramsci’s seminal contribution to twentieth-century Marxism, with focus on a new understanding of state, revolutionary strategy and party. It is evident that Gramsci’s notion of Marxism was an exercise in dissent, with emphasis on subjectivity, as against the mainstream viewpoint that Marxism is a science. In this connection the article makes a critical analysis of the major debates that took place centring on the interpretation of Gramsci’s thought.

The next two essays deal with reinterpretation of the history of international communism in the inter-war period, following new researches after the opening of the Soviet archives and the fall of the USSR. The first essay, “Contrasting Perspectives of International Communism on the Working Class Movement: 1924–1934,” has its focus on the contrasting viewpoints of Stalin, Trotsky and Bukharin concerning the question of socialism in the light of the Stalin-Trotsky and Stalin-Bukharin debates in the Soviet Communist Party after Lenin’s death and their implications for international communism. The following essay “Comintern: Exploring the New Historiography” takes a close look at the new research findings on the Communist International or Third International, generally known as Comintern, in the light of scholarly interpretations. Referring to the new Soviet historiography in the era of *perestroika* and *glasnost* and the post-Soviet historical research on Comintern, the article aims at pointing out the voices of dissent and difference within the Third International, the repression within the Comintern in the Stalin era, the transformation that the Comintern went through after the death of Lenin, the mechanisms of control, surveillance and the phenomenon of Russification that it encountered.

The next four essays deal with themes which have opened up new frontiers of research only very recently. These refer to fresh findings on Nikolai Bukharin, Rosa Luxemburg and David Ryazanov, based on materials from the Soviet archives, which were not accessible earlier. The essay “History’s Suppressed Voice: Significance of Nikolai Bukharin’s Prison Manuscripts (1937–38)” introduces the recently discovered prison manuscripts of Bukharin, examining how in spirit and orientation the texts are very close to Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*, the emphasis being on subjectivity and construction of socialism through hegemony and not domination. The essay points out that, like Gramsci’s *Notebooks*, Bukharin’s prison manuscripts, comprising philosophical, political and literary pieces, also require decoding, written as they were in Stalin’s prison in conditions of strict surveillance after he was arrested in 1937.

The essay “Rosa Luxemburg’s Letters as Texts of a New Vision of Revolutionary Democracy and Socialism” highlights, following the availability of the complete set of letters of Luxemburg, the revolutionary-humanist

dimension of her personality and her deep concern for democracy and pluralism. What is specially striking in the letters is her trenchant critique of mechanical and dogmatic Marxism, her understanding of socialism as a cultural phenomenon, her recognition of the Orient as a key category in the understanding of world culture, her faith in the creativity of the masses and her rejection of terror in the making of socialism.

The essay entitled “Understanding Socialism as Hegemony: Rosa Luxemburg and Nikolai Bukharin” points to the striking similarity of the thoughts of Luxemburg and Bukharin on questions concerning democracy, pluralism, subjectivity and consciousness of the masses. Writing in two different historical contexts, both of them, however, were opposed to any positivist understanding of Marxism, sharing the position that socialism is to be anchored in what Gramsci described as hegemony, as distinct from domination.

The next essay, namely, “Frankfurt School, Moscow and David Ryazanov: New Perspectives,” throws light on an issue that, till now, has been almost unknown to the English speaking world. This refers to the tie-up that was established between the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow under the leadership of David Ryazanov and the Frankfurt School in Germany in the 1920s, which was predominantly controlled by Eduard Bernstein. The collaboration was sought on the question of publication of the archival legacy of Marx and Engels. The essay points out the tremendous possibilities which this project contained and the eventual closure of this cooperation, following the removal and eventual execution of Ryazanov in the Stalin era.

The essay “*Perestroika* and Socialism: Promises and Problems,” which was written in the heyday of *perestroika* in the Gorbachev era, highlights the theoretical importance of the issues that the vibrant debate on *perestroika* generated in the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s. This refers to the quest for democracy and pluralism which these debates opened up, although the meaning of the constituent elements of democracy under what Gorbachev identified as “socialist pluralism” remained undefined and uncertain, sparking off enthusiasm as well as confusion.

Under the second group of six essays the first one “Marxism in Dark Times: Rediscovering a Revolutionary Legacy” attempts to locate the intellectual crisis of Marxism within the Marxist tradition itself and shows how the Marxism of the manuals was instrumental in legitimizing a dogmatic outlook. It further argues that the clues to an alternative understanding, however, are to be traced to the legacy of Marxism but they remained ignored and suppressed for decades.

The next essay “Re-visioning Socialism in a Plural Age” focuses on the importance of recognizing the pluralist-democratic temper in the Marxist tradition by addressing a number of interrelated questions. These are: what are the markers of pluralism in the history of revolutionary socialism? What

contributed to the erosion of these elements? Finally, how to restructure socialism by resurrecting these lost elements, while contesting the liberal and postmodern variants of pluralism?

The next two essays, namely, “Marxism, Modernity and History: Towards an Alternative Understanding” and “Marxism and Postmodernism: Confrontation or Dialogue?” deal with the complex and controversial question relating to Marxism’s negotiation with modernity. The central argument of the first essay is that it is undeniable that Marxism was born under the shadow of Enlightenment and carried, therefore, the signature of modernity. But the version of modernity authored by Marxism ontologically unfolds an alternative project relating to the building of socialism with all its richness and diversities, as distinct from the standardized notion of modernity, which unfurls the roadmap of capitalism in history.

The next essay views Marxism’s engagement with modernity in the context of the debate between Marxism and postmodernism. It contests the position that postmodernism, often claiming to be the new radicalism of the present century, is the substitute for Marxism. At the same time it argues that the relation between Marxism and postmodernism should be marked by dialogue and not confrontation, since postmodernism raises quite a good number of important questions. It is suggested that, if properly contextualized, such a dialogue is possible.

The essay “Intellectuals, Knowledge and the Masses: A Question of Pedagogy” examines the relation of the intellectual to the masses in the light of the Marxist position on pedagogy. The focal point of the essay is that the public intellectuals—intellectuals with a sense of deep moral commitment, as distinct from professional academics—are now on the wane. It is they who in the past have acted as the conscience of society. The essay thus emphasizes that without them it is, indeed, a difficult task to establish any meaningful nexus between the intellectuals and the masses.

The concluding essay in this volume under the title “Marxism in the 21st Century: Towards a New Understanding?” sets the agenda of Marxism in the new millennium in the context of the new philosophical challenges which it has to confront. Questions and issues have been raised and addressed in this article which might appear quite unorthodox and foreign to the traditional Marxists. They can, however, be ignored only at Marxism’s own peril. To be more precise, the roots of the crisis of Marxism are largely theoretical, an issue that was never addressed by the advocates of official Marxism in the past. The collapse of the Soviet brand of Marxism was largely a fallout of this factor. Marxism in the new century, therefore, requires a complete overhaul, a new understanding, as distinct from the manualized understanding of Marxism that has dominated our mind in the past.

It is evident that the essays, notwithstanding their divergent themes, have certain common focal points. They are meant for those readers who have freed themselves from dogmatic trappings and have respect for the values of humanism, democracy and pluralism. The purpose of these essays is to provoke critical responses as well as aim at a sharing of ideas with those who think differently.

PART I

Marxism: Beyond Dogma, an Alternative Quest