

# A Future for Marxism?

Althusser, the Analytical Turn and  
the Revival of Socialist Theory

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Pluto  Press  
LONDON • STERLING, VIRGINIA

First published 2003 by Pluto Press  
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA  
and 22883 Quicksilver Drive,  
Sterling, VA 20166–2012, USA

[www.plutobooks.com](http://www.plutobooks.com)

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 0 7453 1988 2 hardback  
ISBN 0 7453 1987 4 paperback

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data  
Applied for

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Designed and produced for Pluto Press by  
Chase Publishing Services, Fortescue, Sidmouth EX10 9QG  
Typeset from disk by Stanford DTP Services, Towcester  
Printed in the European Union by  
Antony Rowe, Chippenham and Eastbourne, England

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# Preface

Does Marxism have a future? It seems quixotic even to ask this question at a time when it hardly has a present. Everyone these days knows that Marxism is finished; that whatever was right in Marx's thinking was long ago assimilated into the mainstream intellectual culture, and that everything else has been proven wrong beyond a reasonable doubt. Marxism's demise was precipitous. But, by all accounts, it was decisive and irreversible. Therefore, Marx and the *ism* identified with his name are of historical interest only. Anyone who thinks otherwise is blind to the obvious. What follows here challenges this consensus view.

It is instructive to recall that, not long ago, the prevailing wisdom was very different. Well into the 1980s, Marxism was endorsed by some and reviled by others. But no one doubted that it would remain part of the intellectual and political landscape for an indefinite period. There were many 'crises' of Marxism in those days. But its disappearance, on their account, was out of the question. In some quarters, it even seemed that Marxism was being reborn. In addition, a kind of Marxism was still an official ideology in the Soviet Union and China and in their respective spheres of influence. Almost until the moment communism collapsed in Eastern Europe, no one was so prescient as to think that that political reality would change anytime soon. Nor did anyone quite foresee how thoroughly communism would lapse, in substance if not in form, in China. The official Marxism of the communist countries had been an embarrassment to self-identified Marxists in the West for decades before communism's fall. Official Marxism had few defenders, even – indeed, especially – in the lands where it held sway. Still, almost no one questioned the use of the term to designate even that debased form of the genre. As a theoretical and political tradition, Marxism had existed for more than a hundred years. It was, according to the common sense of the time, a mansion with many chambers. Everyone assumed that there was enough of a family resemblance among its varieties, including its Soviet and Chinese versions, to justify calling them all by the same name; and to warrant distinguishing Marxism from rival systems of theory and practice. In this

respect, it resembled Christianity. Like the very different branches of that religion, the various Marxisms, for all their diversity, were joined by a common history and, it was thought, by deeper doctrinal affinities as well.

Nowadays, the idea that all self-described Marxisms share a common core seems less secure than it formerly did. And, contrary to what one would have expected only a few decades ago, this sense of where matters stand has had almost nothing to do with a desire on anyone's part to cast one or another offending version of Marxism out of the fold. For self-identified Marxists in the West, the most likely candidates for exclusion would have to have been the reigning doctrines in some or all of the officially Marxist regimes in power. One might therefore have thought that doubts about the soundness of the designation 'Marxist' would have originated with those who wanted to retain the name for their own doctrinal commitments, while renouncing some or all official Marxisms. But this is not what happened. Long before communism fell or lapsed, it was very nearly a consensus view among self-identified Marxists, especially younger ones, that there was no reason to defend, much less extend, Soviet or Chinese communism. Communism in power had brought discredit upon itself and therefore upon Marxism too, insofar as it was understood to be a kind of Marxism. But, for many years after this conviction had become commonplace, Marxism not only survived; it flourished. Then, ironically, as the Soviet Union passed from the scene, Marxism did too. It is a sign of the times that its absence has been so easily accommodated in the intellectual culture; and that even erstwhile Marxists, insofar as they pay it heed, do not seem particularly upset.

It is for future historians to make sense of this strange turn of events. I will only address a small part of the larger story – the part that concerns recent Marxist philosophy and the circumstances in which it existed. From that vantage point, it looks as if, in the end, it was philosophy, more than anything else, that did Marxism in. Almost without realizing what they were doing, some of Marxism's most philosophically adept practitioners effectively – though, for the most part, only implicitly – came to the view that there is nothing distinctive to 'Marxism' at all except, of course, its history. This conclusion, if true, would be of great importance to anyone who would reflect on Marxism's future. For if there is nothing distinctively Marxist, then the question of Marxism's future would amount to nothing more than a question about the future of those

movements that took on – and, in a few rare cases, continue to take on – the Marxist name. This is not a question of philosophical moment; increasingly, it does not even appear to be a question of political moment. But, no matter; it is not the right question.

As I will show, the notion that there is nothing distinctively Marxist is wrong. I will argue too that a clear understanding of the respects in which it falls short points the way towards a renewal of socialist theory and practice. It will emerge that the old conventional wisdom was closer to the truth than the new one is; that Marxism or, more precisely, Marxist *theory* is not finished – indeed, that key elements of Marx's thought remain timely and urgent. Does this conviction imply that, eventually, Marxism will revive? Not necessarily. It only implies the absence of a *theoretical* obstacle in the way of such an outcome. Beyond that, no one can say what the future holds. For better or worse, Marxism's future, like its present, depends on circumstances that have little to do with the cogency or viability of the ideas of Marx and his successors. But whatever the future of Marxism will be, it can be said with considerable confidence, even now, that political thinking and political life generally will be much diminished if what is genuinely viable in Marxism, and unique to it, passes permanently into oblivion.

To establish this claim and, more generally, to defend the desirability, if not the inevitability, of a future for Marxism, it will not do just to argue for the conceptual distinctiveness of some of Marx's ideas and for their superiority over rival views. Arguments of this sort are, of course, central to any case for Marxism's future. But to be adequate to the task at hand, theoretical considerations must be grounded historically, and their social and political dimensions taken into account. As readers of Marx should know, and as philosophers ignore at their peril, ideas of political consequence are always historically situated and conditioned by their context. Therefore, to grasp their character, and to speculate on their (possible) role in Marxism's future, it is necessary to deal with a host of historical, social, and political issues too.

This is an enormous and daunting task, and I will only broach certain aspects of it here, even at the risk of providing an unbalanced account. The story I will tell focuses on aspects of recent political history that bear on two significant and revealing *philosophical* currents within recent Marxism, and then on those new departures in Marxist philosophy themselves. The first of these philosophical departures was based on the work of Louis Althusser and his

followers. It was a French phenomenon, with important consequences for Marxists and non-Marxists elsewhere, emphatically including the English-speaking world. The other, analytical Marxism, was largely a creature of Anglo-American university culture. The overall cultural impact of analytical Marxism was slight in comparison with Althusserian Marxism, even in the universities in which it briefly flourished. But from a philosophical point of view, its importance was far greater. At their inception, both of these philosophical ventures claimed to be efforts to recover the core of Marx's thinking. Ironically, for many of their practitioners, both became vehicles of exit from Marxism. I will argue that this outcome could have been different, especially for the analytical Marxists; and I will show how these strains of Marxist philosophy – analytical Marxism especially, but also Althusserianism – may yet provide bases for reviving the Marxist tradition.

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The ensuing account falls into two sections. The discussion in Part I is intended to shed light on the prospects for Marxism's future, but its principal purpose is to help to explain the context in which Althusserian and analytical Marxism arose, flourished, and declined. Part II focuses directly on these philosophical movements and their legacy.

I begin, in the Introduction to Part I, with some very tentative and impressionistic reflections on our rapidly changing political environment. Then, in Chapter 1, I sketch the political and intellectual landscape that emerged in the aftermath of the French Revolution, situating socialism's place in that larger picture. I also broach the question of what distinguishes Marxism from other strains of socialist thought – specifically, its claim to be a 'scientific' (as opposed to a 'utopian') theory. This contention will figure prominently in Part II, especially in the chapters on analytical Marxism. In Chapter 2, I venture some thoughts on the New Left as it arose, thrived and then collapsed in the period that began in the mid-1960s and ended in the 1970s. At the time, it appeared that the New Left represented a new beginning. From today's vantage point, it looks more like the final Left, the last gasp of an aspiration born more than two hundred years earlier. Both impressions are false. But it is only in light of the sudden rise and precipitous fall of this political moment that the trajectories of Althusserian and analytical

Marxism make sense. In order to convey a sense of the context in which Marxists did philosophy in recent decades, my account of the New Left and of its ancestors meanders across a wide variety of topics. In order to distill what is essential from it, I draw together the principal claims of the story in the Conclusion to Part I.

For all their differences, Althusserian and analytical Marxism shared a common enemy. They both rejected what I will call 'historicist Marxism', the Marxism of nearly all Marxists before their appearance on the scene. In the Introduction to Part II, I offer a brief account of this received view. I then go on to consider aspects of Althusserian and analytical Marxism that bear on the question of Marxism's future. Chapter 3 focuses on Althusser's metaphilosophy; Chapter 4 on his notion of an 'epistemological break'. Chapter 5 recounts the trajectory of the analytical Marxist movement; and Chapter 6 describes some crucial and distinctively Marxist positions pertaining to 'scientific socialism' and its implications for political theory. There is much that is of value in both historicist and Althusserian Marxism. Whoever today would set them entirely aside imperils the prospects for Marxism's future. But it is the legacy of analytical Marxism that matters most of all. Wittingly or not, the analytical Marxists, more than their traditional or contemporaneous rivals, 'discovered' – or rediscovered – what remains vital in the Marxist tradition. It is therefore to them, more than the others, that we must turn if we are to continue Marx's work. With this thought in mind, I will conclude with a brief account of where matters now stand, and with some very general speculations on what the future may hold.

The chapters that follow present selective, 'broad brush' accounts of their respective subjects. Each advances views that informed readers may find idiosyncratic, overdrawn, or mistaken. I will, of course, defend the more contentious claims I make. But I will not be able to do so to everyone's satisfaction. This is unavoidable, especially in a short book that ranges over so many topics. It is also not entirely to be regretted. God is in the details. But it is an occupational hazard of academics, especially if they are philosophers by training, to become lost in details. Inasmuch as my aim here is to rebut a tenet of the reigning intellectual and political culture, a protracted attempt to pin down each and every claim would be both tedious and distracting. At this point, what is needed, above all, is a synoptic account dedicated to dislodging the unfounded and debilitating but nevertheless pervasive idea that Marxism's vitality is



spent. The *Communist Manifesto* famously proclaimed that in bourgeois society, ‘everything solid’ eventually ‘melts into air’. The view today of those who were on the cutting edge of Marxist theory only a few years ago is that Marxism already has. I will argue that their own best work proves them wrong.

\* \* \*

The story I will recount is one I have lived through. I was involved in New Left politics – albeit only in the United States, and then mainly in New York City, where, for a variety of reasons, including the presence of sectarian Old Left groups of every imaginable description, the experience was somewhat atypical. I became interested in Althusser’s work at that time; a period in which he was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world and especially in the United States. My very first publications were on Althusser – in *Radical America* (vol. 3, no. 5, 1969; and vol. 4, no. 6, 1970), then the ‘theoretical journal’ of the main grouping of radical students in the United States, the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Althusser, it seems, ran against the American grain, as SDS understood it; accordingly, the editors of *Radical America* insisted on publishing my papers along with no fewer than five spirited critiques. Undaunted, in 1969, I went to France in the hope of immersing myself in an Althusserian milieu. Unfortunately, 1969 was one of those years when the master was ‘indisposed’ (for psychiatric reasons that would later become all too clear). Meanwhile, Althusserian circles, like so much else in French intellectual life at the time, proved impenetrable. Nevertheless, I remained a fellow-traveler for most of the next decade, long after the Althusserian ‘moment’ had passed in France and even in Great Britain. Eventually, my steadfastness lapsed. Then, thanks to some collaborative work I did, beginning in the late 1970s, with Erik Olin Wright, I became directly immersed in the analytical Marxist current. I was never as enthusiastic about analytical Marxism’s prospects as most of its leading figures were. But I have remained more committed to the project than most of them have become. To a much diminished degree, the same is true of my present regard for New Left politics and Althusserian Marxism. This may be a sign of the ‘foolish consistency’ that Ralph Waldo Emerson deemed ‘the hobgoblin of little minds’. I hope not. In any case, there is a sense in which what follows is a defense against this charge; an apologia

for a New Left, Althusserian and analytical Marxist past. But, of course, that is the least of it. What matters is the future. My contention is that, at this point in history, understanding these political and philosophical phenomena is crucial, perhaps even indispensable, for renewing socialist thought.

\* \* \*

A distant ancestor of Chapters 3 and 4, on Althusser, is a paper I published more than twenty years ago called ‘Althusser’s Marxism’ (*Economy and Society*, vol. 10, no. 3, 1981, pp. 243–83). That paper represented, at the time, a ‘settling of accounts’ with my Althusserian past. Although my view of the importance of Althusser’s work is now quite different from what it was then, I find myself, even now, focusing on the same broad themes – Althusser’s various accounts of ‘philosophical practice’, and his useful, but potentially misleading, notion of an ‘epistemological break’. Chapter 5, the first of the chapters on analytical Marxism, overlaps substantially with my entry on ‘Marxism’ in Gerald Gauss and Chandran Kukathas, eds., *Handbook of Political Theory* (Sage, forthcoming) I am grateful to the editors for permission to draw on that material. That chapter and, even more, Chapters 6 and the Conclusion draw on and develop themes I have addressed in many publications over the past several decades, including *The End of the State* (London: Verso, 1987); *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays in Explanation and the Theory of History*, co-authored with Erik Olin Wright and Elliott R. Sober (London: Verso, 1992), *The General Will: Rousseau, Marx, Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); *Rethinking Liberal Equality: From a ‘Utopian’ Point of View* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998); and, most recently, the chapter on Marx in *Engaging Political Philosophy: Hobbes to Rawls* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001). Readers familiar with those writings will find echoes of them here. But my aim in this book, unlike the others, is not to work *in* an analytical Marxist vein. It is to try to make sense of what it all meant, of what it continues to mean, and of what it could mean in the years ahead.

# Part I



# Introduction to Part I

Marxism's future, like its present, depends, more than anything else, on the ambient political culture in which it exists. At the same time, today's political culture has been shaped, in part, by Marxism's past. I will not attempt to untangle this complex web of causal interactions; it would be an impossible task. But, as a prelude to a more focused account of aspects of Marxism's history that bear on the prospects for Marxism's future, and on the role Althusserian and analytical Marxism might play in it, it will be useful to begin with a few reflections on where we now are and where we seem to be going. Because Marxism is presently in near total eclipse, I will not have much to say about the state of Marxism today. But I will venture some remarks on the larger situation in which its present is implicated. Here, then, are some thoughts on the exhaustion of political imagination in our time; its implications for real-world politics; and on signs that, once again, the world is changing – to an uncertain situation, rife with danger, but with enhanced opportunities for renewing socialist theory and practice. The impressions I will convey pertain most directly to the United States. But they are not, for that reason, misleadingly parochial. It is part of the story of our time that the one remaining superpower is rapidly making the world over in its image.

Needless to say, it is too soon to put the present in anything like a definitive perspective. But the broad outlines of an account are already becoming clear. Thus it is fair to say that, in the last years of the old millennium, political imagination was everywhere in decline and, along with it, the idea that the political institutions of the West could be improved upon fundamentally. This was a massive and sudden development, more remarkable even than Marxism's own precipitous fall. It was also a situation that called for remediation, if for no other reason than that it fed complacency and degraded political life. In the first years of the twenty-first century, the effects of this transformation of the political culture are increasingly felt. Blowback from ill-conceived imperialist ventures and the realities of corporate globalizaton are ever more salient; desperation is everywhere on the rise. The world is therefore in for turbulent times ahead. But, as before in human history, the pendulum will surely swing back – provided, of course, that unspeakable catastrophes are

averted. Big changes are already under way. Political imagination is stirring. The world seems a more dangerous place than it was just a few years ago. But it is also less complacent. Resistance is increasing and, with it, the possibility that progressive forces will emerge strengthened. This is why the time is ripe to press forward. To seize the moment, though, we must first take stock of the situation at hand.

\* \* \*

In the economically developed and liberal democratic West, the exhaustion of political imagination is palpable mainly in retrospect. This is as true for those of us who have lived through the entire sea change as it is for those who have come on board more recently. Until the outbreak of the so-called 'war on terrorism',<sup>1</sup> great events, like wars or revolutions, hardly affected the lives of people in the West. Even the fall of communism and the disaggregation of the Third World had hardly any effect on lived experience. These mutations on the world scene may help to explain the political metamorphoses of recent years. But they have not registered as discontinuities in the lives of most inhabitants of the developed and stable liberal democracies. They resonate, if at all, not with a bang but a whimper, perceived from afar. If, as some claim, history ended with the triumph of Western institutions, one would have to say that it did so discreetly, without calling attention to itself.<sup>2</sup>

The banality of political life in our time is especially evident in the United States, where electoral contests have come to resemble advertising promotions for nearly indistinguishable products, and where everyone knows that, whoever wins elections, more or less the same corporate interests will continue to rule. Remarkably, this fact is accepted with indifference or jaded annoyance, not outrage. Who would have predicted, a quarter century ago, that politics would become so insipid so rapidly, and that people in motion at the time would react by retreating into private life! The generation that came of age politically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the generation that now controls what used to be called 'the commanding heights' of the state, the economy, and civil society, was thought to have rejected the apathy emblematic of the generation that preceded it.<sup>3</sup> This was what 'the New Left' was supposed to be about. But now, as 'baby boomers' age, apathy reigns in the public arena again, and baby boomers are leading the way.

There are exceptions, of course. There are still unreconstructed leftists from that generation and earlier ones, and hosts of younger militants as well. But thanks to the exhaustion of political imagination, the ever growing numbers of people who are again coming together 'to change life' must not only reinvent the wheel; they must do so in the face of what sometimes seems to be an almost insurmountable inertia. Militants today know, as well as anyone ever did, how to organize and maneuver at a tactical level. They know what to mobilize *against*. But, with political imagination becoming ever more degraded year after year, it is less clear than it has ever been what to mobilize *for*. This uncertainty is increasingly debilitating as new political movements develop and expand.

In much the way that, according to the conventional wisdom, the good side of Marxism has been absorbed into mainstream thinking, while the rest, the 'nonsense' that once seemed important, has been rightfully cast aside, there are 'progressives' today who think that all Left initiatives worth retaining have already taken root in the political culture; and therefore that the Left, or at least the New Left, is the victim, not of a failure of imagination, but of its own success. What they have in mind is the preeminence now accorded in the political sphere to cultural issues, including questions of 'identity' and 'inclusiveness'. There is some truth in this contention. But the victories of the New Left, such as they were, were won at a tremendous price. The causes advanced by the social movements that emerged under the aegis of New Left politics had first to be deradicalized and even depoliticized before they were welcomed into the mainstream. Once there, they have been put to use further depoliticizing the political sphere. In the United States, this process is, by now, so complete that cultural themes, broadly construed, have come to define the terms in which differences register in mainstream politics. Republicans and Democrats part ways, to the degree that they still do, along these lines. It is as if the old axes of political contestation, questions of economic power and ultimately of class struggle, no longer matter. In the electoral arena especially, these issues are seldom in dispute. How could it be otherwise when the same monied interests control both parties!

For the political class or, rather, for those in the academy and the media who rationalize their situation, the reigning idea is not exactly that an 'age of ideology' is over; that the old oppositions have faded in the face of an emerging consensus that integrates formerly contending parties. That was the view of some former leftists decades

ago.<sup>4</sup> They evidently felt a need to defend their turn away from radical politics. It seems that no comparable need is felt by former activists of the New Left. The view today is just that radicalism lost, and that on the whole, it was a good thing that it did – because Western, liberal institutions beat all rivals on all counts, and because the economic system that has matured under their auspices has provided a degree of prosperity that would have been unthinkable had a more radical vision prevailed. This is why many erstwhile New Leftists, when they think about it at all, look back on their youthful enthusiasms with a certain nostalgia for the idealism of the time, but without regret for a political venture that went awry.

One clear consequence of the exhaustion of political imagination over the past quarter century has been a sharp shift of the political mainstream to the right. In this regard too, the American case is exemplary. Not long ago, in the United States, liberalism was the order of the day. The political settlements of the Roosevelt and Truman eras were firmly in place. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society even promised a renaissance of New Deal liberalism, one that would at last address problems of institutional racism and other consequences of slavery and white America's near annihilation of indigenous peoples. The Great Society became a casualty of the Vietnam War. But, at the time and for a few years thereafter, it seemed that American liberalism, still in command, was becoming more like European social democracy in its post-World War II phase. The difference was just that the American version lacked the historical connection to socialism that was part of social democracy's heritage. Not unrelatedly, American liberals also had weaker ties to the labor movement than their social democratic or laborite counterparts. Therefore, their politics was, on the whole, more business friendly than theirs and their self-representations were generally less visionary than was commonplace in European social democratic parties or in the British Labour Party. Even so, the general drift of American liberalism and therefore of mainstream politics in the United States was of a piece with social democracy elsewhere. The idea that affirmative state programs should play a predominant role in insuring economic well-being and in rectifying social problems seemed well entrenched and beyond serious dispute.

It was only at the fringes of the political culture that anyone thought otherwise. In the United States, there had long existed a dedicated minority intent on dismantling the New Deal. In 1964, with the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president, they seized



control of the Republican Party. But after the resounding defeat of Goldwater's presidential bid, liberal dominance appeared more secure than it had ever been. The economic and social policies that were in place before the Roosevelt presidency, the old neoliberal regime the Goldwaterites favored, appeared to have fallen irreversibly into 'the ashbin of history', much as Marxism seems to have done today.

How things have changed! Today the ideas of that defeated fringe are even more hegemonic than New Deal and Great Society liberalism formerly were. And the dismantling of the vestiges of that earlier orthodoxy, and of bolder social democratic initiatives in countries with more vibrant political traditions, has been carried out with zest and efficacy by political leaders drawn from the generation that produced the New Left. Goldwater's politics has succeeded on a world scale beyond the imaginings of its most ardent proponents decades ago. It has taken over the political common sense of our time – to such an extent that it even informs the thinking of those who still call themselves liberals or, more often, proponents of a 'Third Way'. It is of some interest to observe that many of the principal exponents of these ostensibly new political orientations, the real undoers of liberalism and social democracy, cut their teeth politically on the fringes of the New Left and even, in a few conspicuous European cases, at its core.

Since the account I will give of Marxism's future focuses mainly on philosophical departures within Marxism and on related developments in political theory, it bears notice too that a largely unacknowledged but equally remarkable transformation is evident from the professional vantage point of academic political philosophy. The change there has been more complex than in the larger political culture, and considerably more equivocal. On the one hand, in the past quarter century, political philosophy, especially in the English-speaking world, has insulated itself with great success from the real world of politics. In fact, for reasons peculiar to its own internal dynamic, it has proceeded on a somewhat different course from the prevailing political culture. But, viewed in retrospect, no matter how apolitical and even contrary-minded mainstream political philosophy has become, it too reflects the zeitgeist. A profound diminution of political imagination is evident even in this domain. But because it has divorced itself so effectively from ongoing political affairs, because its trajectory has been, to some degree, internally generated, and because it remains connected to earlier,

more vibrant, moments in the history of political thought, academic political philosophy today provides conceptual resources indispensable for those militants, already in motion, whose need for a revival of political imagination has become acute.

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Perhaps the most telling indicator of the nature of politics in our time has been the virtual disappearance of an organized Left. I will use *Left* and *Right*, as I have to this point, to describe the political orientations these terms have designated, loosely but unmistakably, since that moment in revolutionary France, more than two centuries ago, when the more radical delegates to the National Assembly seated themselves to the left of the presiding officer. It is fortuitous that this usage stuck because it introduces a useful ambiguity into descriptions of political orientations. It is ambiguous because *left* and *right* are relational concepts; *left* is defined in contrast to *right*, and vice versa. Strictly speaking, therefore, these terms have no fixed meaning. Political parties and social movements that everyone understands to be on the Left have their own left and right wings, as do movements and parties of the Right. Here, however, except when otherwise indicated, I will use these terms to designate positions on an idealized political spectrum. Until recently, these notions were inscribed in the 'collective consciousness' of nearly everyone who thought about political affairs. In recent years, however, along with the exhaustion of political imagination and largely in consequence of it, the idea has been floated that the longstanding division between Left and Right has somehow become obsolete. I would venture that this thought is itself an effect of the rightward drift of mainstream politics. In what follows, I will, in any case, assume that claims for the irrelevancy of the notions of Left and Right are without merit. The problem today is not that Left and Right no longer have any meaning. It is that there is hardly any Left left.

It is also commonplace to use the term *Center* in reference to this idealized political spectrum. This usage can be misleading, however, because, in politics, the Center is not exactly a 'midpoint' between the Left and the Right. As a rough approximation, though, and in accordance with conventional understandings, it is fair to think of the Center that way, at least for now. In speaking of the virtual disappearance of the Left, then, I mean that those political formations that traditionally comprised the Left no longer stand on the left end

of that idealized spectrum – that they have moved to the center or even the right, even when, as is often the case, they acknowledge a continuous historical connection with their pasts. To cite a pale example, the Democratic Party in the United States has been understood, at least since the Roosevelt era, to be, if not exactly a party of the Left, then the closest approximation of one that mainstream political life in the United States provided. But, on the idealized Left–Right spectrum that defines political orientations, the Democratic Party, whatever it may once have been, nowadays is, at most, a party of the Center or Center-Right, with a small and increasingly marginalized left wing. Much the same is true of political parties in other countries that, more plainly than the Democratic Party, genuinely did once belong to the Left.

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It is instructive to use a medical analogy to describe the situation we are in. In dealing with illnesses, it is customary, first, to identify symptoms, then to diagnose a disease, and only at that point, finally, to look for an explanation that can facilitate a cure. So far, I have called attention to a few important symptoms. In real medical contexts, it is often possible to abbreviate this step or to eliminate it altogether because it is seldom necessary to establish that a patient is ill. But with political imagination depleted, our sensibilities have become, as it were, so run down that it is difficult to see that there is a problem at all, much less a debilitating condition from which public life suffers. It is as if having lived for a long time with a chronic ailment, we have come to think that this is the way that life must be, and no longer notice our distress. Hence the need to establish that the political culture is sick. This is the first step towards arriving at a diagnosis and ultimately an explanation illuminating enough to suggest a remedy. To continue this analogy, good diagnoses reveal how disparate symptoms hang together, how they indicate the presence of a single underlying disease. In this respect, the condition that afflicts our political life runs true to form. Just as a well-defined disease can have many distinct and overlapping causes, a whole panoply of factors have no doubt joined together, each in its own way, to bring about the current state of affairs. But what is crucial is the common thread that runs through the symptoms. This is what suggests a common diagnosis and therefore a single disease; one that may indeed be amenable to a cure.

That thread, I submit, is a loss of faith in progress or, more precisely, in a better world that differs in kind, not just degree, from our own. It was an idea of progress sufficiently broad to encompass a notion of radical, not just incremental, change that motivated the political orientation of the historical Left – especially, but not only, its socialist wing. Without such an idea in the background or, better still, at the forefront of political thought, the Left, if it survives at all, can only devolve into a motley of good causes, bereft of any guiding vision or indeed of any unifying principle whatsoever. We will find that, for no compelling reason, a defensible rational intuition, sustaining that notion of progress, has been set aside – apparently in consequence of perceived flaws in efforts to give it theoretical expression. But there was never any need to take such a step. Quite the contrary. Socialist theory, or at least the version of it that emerges in those new departures in Marxist philosophy that appear, from today's vantage point, to have sealed Marxism's fate, provides ample resources for vindicating faith in the possibility of a genuinely better – and fundamentally different – social, political and economic order.

Nevertheless, it is likely that observers looking back on this period will conclude that a loss of faith in progress was a conspicuous feature of the spirit of the time, perhaps the most conspicuous feature. It is a theme played out repeatedly in the work of culture critics, literary scholars, and public intellectuals. So-called postmodernists, especially, are quick to advance the idea that there are no 'master narratives' in human history and therefore no defensible notions of human progress. I will not take on this murky but still fashionable *fin de siècle* form of 'discourse' here – partly because I think that the trouble required to make postmodernist claims clear enough to engage polemically is not worth the effort, and partly because it is unnecessary. The idea that historical narratives and therefore notions of qualitative progress are neither true nor false, but only better or worse for some social groups, is best refuted by showing how sense can be made of the ideas postmodernists reject. This form of indirect rebuttal will be a recurrent, albeit tacit, theme throughout the chapters that follow.

But it is not only, or even mainly, postmodernists who have come to the conclusion that there are no ways of organizing basic social, political and economic institutions that are both better and radically different from liberal democratic and capitalist ways. For want of imagination, this view of the human prospect has come to be