

Review Essay



Domenico Losurdo, *Western Marxism: How it Was Born, How it Died, and How it Can be Reborn*, ed. G. Rockhill (New York, NY: Monthly Review Press, 2024)

Over the last decade or so, Marxism has been back on the agenda in many academic and activist circles in the Anglophone world. Certainly, the situation is quite different from the 1990s, when Marxism was pronounced dead and buried. The return of Marxism naturally raises the question: which Marxism?

Domenico Losurdo's book, now made available for the first time to readers in the English-speaking world through the editorial efforts of Gabriel Rockhill and translated by Steven Colateralla and George De Stefano, provides a compelling answer to this question. In this book Losurdo seeks to provide a systematic historical-philosophical critique of Western Marxism from its origins to its self-liquidation. The book is divided into six parts. Part I seeks to unravel the origins of Western and Eastern Marxism during the World War I period, especially in relation to different responses to the 1917 October Revolution. Part II takes up the pivotal debate on the relationship between the anti-colonial revolutions of the twentieth century and socialist revolutions, a debate that created fissures which still remain today. The luminaries of Western Marxism, such as Max Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, Theodor W. Adorno, Lucio Colletti, Louis Althusser and Herbert Marcuse, are all subjected to a sustained critique in Part III. Part IV is devoted to a critical investigation of the use and abuse of the category of totalitarianism which, in the hands of the likes of Hannah Arendt, was deployed to draw false equivalencies between the Soviet Union and the Third Reich, while also underplaying the obvious continuity between the Third Reich and European colonialism carried out under ostensibly liberal states. The Eurocentric blinkers which characterize the work of thinkers such as Emmanuel Levinas, Michel Foucault, Antonio Negri, and Michael Hardt are also exposed.

Western Marxism's pathological aversion to all forms of power, including forms of power that have liberated tens of millions from colonial thralldom

over the course of the twentieth century, is explored in Part v. Losurdo not only criticizes the intellectuals who are grouped under the label of “Western Marxism”, he also extends his critique to Marx. Thus, in Part vi, Losurdo takes Marx to task for thinking that the American Revolution had brought about “complete political emancipation” (p. 215). According to Losurdo, Marx’s assessment of the achievements of advanced capitalist societies in the sphere of formal political equality was far too naïve, and this assessment was uncritically accepted by the proponents of Western Marxism. In this respect, Losurdo reverses the charge of dogmatism which Western Marxists have often directed at the proponents of Eastern Marxism.

The book also contains an additional essay by Losurdo in the appendix which serves as a condensed summary of the key points of the book. In addition, the introduction by Jennifer Ponce de León and Gabriel Rockhill, provides the reader with helpful contextual information regarding Losurdo’s own relationship with the Italian Communist Party. Rockhill and de León also helpfully trace out the manner in which Losurdo’s critique can be extended beyond its initial targets to post-modern theorists in literary studies as well as strands of post-colonial and de-colonial theory in Western Academia.

Losurdo’s analysis of the split between Western and Eastern Marxism seeks to explain it in terms of radically differing attitudes towards the state. In the West, Marxist intellectuals reacted to the slaughter of World War I by denouncing the state as a demonic Moloch (p. 48). Of course, a similar sentiment can be detected in Lenin’s *State and Revolution* (1917). Yet as the Bolsheviks came to power, the utopian hope of a state which works to make itself superfluous was seen for the messianic vision that it was. Moreover, the 1917 Revolution was, as Losurdo emphasizes continually, received by the colonized world as an anti-colonial revolution first and foremost. In the colonized world, where the goal was the attainment of an independent state, theories about the withering away of the state could not be taken seriously. The goal was in fact state building. Thus, in the post-1917 period, while Western Marxists were dreaming of the withering away of the state, the Bolsheviks were animated by problems of industrialization, including the importation of techniques associated with Taylorism (p. 68). In fact, Eastern Marxists and Western Marxists drifted further and further apart over the course of the 1930s and 1940s. Thus, while Hitler’s armies were engaged in fighting a colonial war of extermination against the Soviet Union, Horkheimer writing in 1942 could chide the Bolsheviks for abandoning the dream of “the abolition of the state” (p. 112). As Losurdo points out, it was only by means of the “forced march to industrial development” (p. 112), which was resented as a betrayal by Western Marxists, that the Soviet Union could survive the massive onslaught by the Nazi war machine.

The fundamental problem is that the communist parties which came into power were all faced with societies that were in need of industrialization and modernization if they were to survive at all. The Western Marxists, by contrast, were exclusively interested in Marxism as a theoretical instrument for abolishing capitalism and effecting a radical break with the past, whereby the deployment of state power would be consigned to the pre-history of humanity (pp. 223–224). Losurdo, drawing on Mao, indicates that in places like the Soviet Union, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, the communist parties had to take on the task of constructing the bourgeois society which, in classical Marxist theory, was supposed to have been brought about by the metropolitan bourgeoisie in its quest to remake the world in its own image. Western Marxist intellectuals had very little interest in this problem and were fixated on the second stage, namely the post-capitalist stage.

In the course of its mobilization efforts during World War II, the Soviet Union did turn to nationalism as a galvanizing force. The question of whether nationalism could ever be an emancipatory force constitutes another fault line in the history of Marxism in the twentieth century. Losurdo quite accurately identifies the facetious manner in which Adorno sought to establish a sort of elective affinity between the nationalism of the Third World and Nazism (p. 121). On this point Adorno converged with the likes of Anthony Eden. The latter famously described Nasser as a “kind of Moslem Mussolini” (Office of the Historian, 1957). Losurdo’s response to such flippant remarks is simple yet effective. Losurdo notes that there is an obvious difference between the anti-colonial nationalism of the Third World and that of the European fascist movements. The former was an attempt to extend the right of national self-determination to peoples who were deemed by Europeans to be biologically inferior. The latter was an attempt to restrict the right of national self-determination to the *Herrenvolk* (p. 122).

Losurdo analyzes the debate which took place in 1954 between Galvano Della Volpe and Palmiro Togliatti (the General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party) over the relationship between Marxism and liberalism. Della Volpe championed the standard position that liberalism enshrined formal (negative) freedom which Marxism seeks to preserve while also extending social rights (or positive freedom). Togliatti recognized the main problem with this view: the majority of people who lived under the rule of states which purportedly adhered to Western liberalism were colonized peoples who did not share in the experience of exasperation with the merely formal nature of bourgeois negative freedom, because it was never extended to them in the first place (pp. 94–95)! In a sense, we can say that the problem with Marxism in its Eurocentric form is that it is too charitable towards

liberalism. It attributes to liberalism achievements that it is innocent of (p. 216). Losurdo remarks on the irony of the date of this debate, for 1954 was the year of the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ when the Việt Minh forces defeated the French in a war of independence which was fought, at least partly, in the name of the formal bourgeois freedom which Western liberal states had, according to Della Volpe and other Western Marxists, already actualized in the world.

When Bloch writes that “capitalism took an interest in an evenly expanding universalization of juridical rules” (p. 237), he neglects to note that European colonial rule on the African continent was based first and foremost on the imposition of a dual juridical system, one for the settlers and one for the natives (this is spelled out in detail in Mamdani, 2020 [2001]). It was only through sustained anti-colonial struggles, sometimes armed in character, that this juridical duality was abolished. It seems strange, and perhaps even perverse, to attribute to the immanent logic of capitalism (or to liberalism) concessions which had to be wrenched from it at the point of a bayonet. This is not simply a matter of setting the historical record straight. Recognizing the role of pressure and even violence in gaining the concessions which have been retrospectively attributed to the immanent logic of liberalism is important for understanding how further social progress is possible. A point that Losurdo himself makes in another book (Losurdo, 2017).

Western Marxists, according to Losurdo, have also failed to adequately understand the relationship between anti-colonial revolutions and socialist revolutions, and to this extent Western Marxism turned its back on Lenin's most important legacy, namely the thesis that anti-colonial revolutions are a necessary condition for socialist revolutions. Anti-colonial revolutions can be seen as a necessary condition for socialist revolutions in at least two ways. The most obvious way is that in the colonies and semi-colonies, political independence is a necessary condition for the beginning of any attempt at building a socialist society because without it one cannot, as Amílcar Cabral puts it, liberate “the national productive forces” from foreign domination (Cabral, 1966). Yet, Western Marxists, such as Marcuse have argued that this might be all well and good, but it “has nothing to do with the construction of a socialist society” (p. 125). Presumably by this claim Marcuse means that national liberation in the colonies has nothing to do with building a socialist society in the advanced capitalist societies. For it is absurd for him to believe that national liberation “has nothing to do with the construction of a socialist society” in the colonized societies, since this would be akin to saying that a necessary condition for bringing about a given state of affairs has nothing to do with that state of affairs.

Losurdo's response to Marcuse is to shift the ground and ask, on utilitarian-humanistic grounds: "why should reducing planetary social polarization be less important than reducing it within a single country?" (p. 126). This is a reasonable response in so far as any humane person would believe that the reduction of global poverty is a laudable goal. However, I think that Losurdo could have offered a different response and defended a stronger thesis. Losurdo could have pointed out that the success of anti-colonial revolutions is also a necessary condition for bringing about a socialist transformation in the advanced capitalist countries insofar as these revolutions serve to attack the sources of power of the ruling classes in the advanced capitalist countries. The genocidal war of extermination which is being waged by the Israeli war machine as I write is supported and indeed encouraged by the ruling classes of the West since they do in fact have good reason to think that what is at stake in this colonial war is the preservation of the world they built and the place that they have secured for themselves in it (Ajl, 2024).

It is rather ironic to note that it was also another Israeli aggression that led to what Losurdo aptly labels as "the August 4th of Critical Theory". We are referring to the 1967 June War when Israel launched a war of conquest against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. In response, Marcuse engaged in a tortuous chain of reasoning with the aim of justifying the thesis that "the preventive war (as in fact, was the war against Egypt, Jordan, and Syria) could and must be understood and justified" (p. 129) (the war was not in fact preventive in character, see Kandil, 2014: p. 73). Marcuse was too intellectually honest to believe in the cogency of his own arguments about the preventive nature of the war and in the final analysis, he justified his stance in favour of Israel on the grounds of emotional solidarity: "on the left [in the United States] there is a quite strong and entirely understandable tendency to identify with Israel. On the other hand, the left, particularly the Marxist left, cannot pretend to ignore that the Arab world coincides in part with the anti-imperialist camp. In this case, emotional and conceptual solidarity are objectively separated, indeed even split" (p. 129). This appeal to emotional solidarity based on ethnic-racial identity and perceived civilizational affinity is really no different in kind from Napoleon's own justification of his restoration of slavery in Haiti: "I am for the whites because I am white; there is no other reason beyond this, but this is good enough" (p. 103). It is not a hard-headed attitude which drives Western Marxists' suspicion of intellectual and political currents which they dismiss with the label of "Third Worldism", but rather an inability to suspend a race-based emotional solidarity which has no adequate normative grounding.

The appeal to emotional solidarity implies that a proper understanding of the Eurocentric character of Western Marxism and the positions that Western

Marxist intellectuals have taken on the pivotal events of the twentieth century can only be understood in terms of a detailed sociology of knowledge. Since obviously the positions taken are the products of theories that are not in accord with any reasonable engagement with the available evidence. There is no doubt that reasons are offered by Western Marxists to justify their contempt for practices and theories that have emerged from “actually existing socialist” societies. Yet one suspects that such reasons have no explanatory power when it comes to explaining why those intellectuals held the positions that they held and why their epigones at *The New Left Review* “have ongoing disagreement over whether ‘genocide’ is the most accurate term for Israel’s carpet-bombing of Gaza” as Israeli leaders explicitly proclaim and carry out their genocidal plans against Palestinians (Angel, 2024). Losurdo’s book helps us contextualize and comprehend this line of thinking.

Losurdo’s central thesis is that it is only by abandoning its Eurocentric blinkers and its utopian messianic dreams that Western Marxism can have a future. Western Marxism’s Eurocentric blinkers do not just result in normative moral failings, but also in epistemic ones. For if one is serious about the thesis that there is an intimate connection between practical efforts at social and political transformation on the one hand and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge about social structures and how to transform them on the other hand, then one would be remiss to ignore the theoretical writings of the likes of Hồ Chí Minh. Losurdo’s call for Western Marxists to pay attention to the writings of Eastern Marxists is not a call to charity. To frame it in terms of charity would be to adopt the same patronizing Eurocentric attitude that Losurdo wants us to challenge. Rather Losurdo’s point is that without paying attention to the writings of Eastern Marxists, Western Marxism will continue to suffer from systematic epistemic shortcomings (p. 87).

Losurdo does not provide the detailed sociology of knowledge which his account seems to demand. This is not a criticism of the book, since it would be unreasonable to ask that Losurdo, as a philosopher in the disciplinary sense, should carry out this project himself. Moreover, such a sociology of knowledge would have to take account of the fact that “Western Marxism” is not simply a geographical designator. For there were Marxists, such as Togliatti (and Losurdo himself!) who were from the West but who did not endorse the set of positions associated with Western Marxism. Nor can we simply talk of the distinction between the proponents of “Western Marxism” and the proponents of “Eastern Marxism” as a distinction between Marxists who did not hold power and those who held power, as Losurdo is sometimes tempted to do (p. 206). For while Togliatti’s anti-Western Marxist views can be explained by appealing to the fact that he held power (at least as General Secretary), the views of Losurdo

himself cannot be explained this way.¹ Hence, an adequate philosophically and historically sophisticated sociology of knowledge remains as a desideratum. It is a great merit of Losurdo's book to have clarified this point, and there is work now being done on this problem from a detailed sociological standpoint (Rockhill, 2022).²

There is however, a problem that emerges in the course of reading Losurdo's book. This has to do with the ambiguity of his own position on different interpretations of historical materialism. In parts of the book Losurdo seems to veer quite close to a technological determinist interpretation of historical materialism. Losurdo writes as if what drives historical transformations is the development of productive forces (treated as an independent variable), and that only when the development of productive forces has reached a certain threshold is it even feasible to attempt the transition to socialism. Yet Losurdo does not state his position explicitly. This represents a problem because the reader is apt to suspect that he sometimes assimilates thinkers to this position in a somewhat hasty manner. For example, Losurdo quotes Mao's claim that "only modernization could save China" (p. 84) without contextualizing it.

In his youth Mao was, of course, deeply influenced by the May Fourth Movement, with its anti-Confucianism and its demand for modern science (Ch'en, 1965: pp. 62–63). Undoubtedly Mao remained a proponent of modernization and the assimilation of modern science and technology, yet Maoist policy was not exclusively concerned with the development of productive forces without qualification. In fact, Maoist China's policies on technological development and technology transfer were a model for many Marxists in the Third World precisely because the Chinese grappled seriously with the question of whether technology was neutral vis-à-vis different modes of production (Ajl, 2021). In other words, there was sustained debate about the extent to which the standard technological determinist conception of historical materialism was naïve to the extent that it discounted the manner in which dominant relations of production in a given social formation could shape the form of technological development and create technologies which favour certain social relations of production as opposed to others.

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- 1 Here I must confess to my own partiality to the so-called symmetry thesis which is commonly associated with the strong programme of the Edinburgh School, but which was in fact first articulated by Robin Horton (1993: p. 4). The symmetry thesis simply states that social explanations are required not only to explain error (most people accept this), but also to explain how people come to arrive at knowledge (most people do not accept this).
 - 2 It is my understanding that Rockhill is working on a series of book length studies of this question.

If the specificity of Maoist thinking on the dangers of technology transfer is ignored, then there is a chance that we will flatten the distinction between, for example, Maoist China and the China of the post-1978 period. For the justification of the reforms, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, was precisely the need to accelerate the development of productive forces through sustained technology transfer (Meisner, 1999: pp. 452–453). The brakes that had been placed on massive technology transfer were removed. This involved jettisoning the worries that Maoists had about the extent to which forms of technology developed in a capitalist society could be seen as not appropriate for a socialist society which aimed at institutionalizing socialist relations of production. Of course, one could hold that Mao was wrong on this, and that Deng, with his emphasis on the necessity of privileging the growth of productive forces, was correct, but this is quite different from eliding the disagreements between the two as Losurdo appears to do.

Moreover, an emphasis on the problem of the relationship between relations of production and technology allows for the revelation of potential points of contact between Western Marxism and Eastern Marxism. The possibility of reconciliation between the two strands of Marxism is something that Losurdo himself is deeply interested in (p. 72). For he obviously is not committed to the view that since Western Marxists have misunderstood the anticolonial revolutions of the twentieth century, they have nothing of interest to say about, for example, the relationship between Hegel and Marx, Spinoza and Marx, or aesthetic theory.

Western Marxists were suspicious and indeed overly suspicious of science and technology in a way that Eastern Marxists were not (pp. 58–60). Losurdo is right that the thinkers of the Frankfurt School were wrong in thinking that science and technology were wholly shaped by capitalism in such a way that it was impossible to deploy them for emancipatory purposes (an extensive argument for this claim is provided in El Nabolsy, 2022). However, they were right to note that, in the case of technology especially, purpose is not sufficient for determining form. There is always a degree of indeterminacy insofar as the reliable production of a certain physical effect is compatible with several forms. What we take to be the only way to accomplish a certain physical effect is in fact the product of our assumptions about economic efficiency and social appropriateness (this point is made very elegantly in Pye, 1978). They were also right to note that, in many cases, what the inventors of technology in Western society were after when they invented the machines that they invented was a machine that produced a certain reliable physical effect while also preserving certain social relations. This is a point which is supported by historical research on the relationship between technology and social relations of production

(Layton, 1989; Staudenmaier, 1989; Cuomo, 2011). Hence, the problems of technology transfer in a society that is attempting to build socialism cannot be systematically resolved without becoming clear on the causal relationship between relations of production and forces of production.

All of this notwithstanding, Losurdo makes it clear to us that any serious treatment of this problem has to take into account the existential dangers under which the process of industrialization in actually existing socialist societies was taking place. Western Marxists have embodied the “beautiful soul” as described by Hegel. They have taken up the position of self-satisfied critics of the world and of attempts to change the prevailing order without sullyng their hands by intervening in the world. As Losurdo shows us, when seen against the background of the unimaginable suffering which has filled the annals of human history, the “beautiful soul” invariably appears as ugly and pitiful.

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