Jiri Pehe, Benedict Seymour
The critical divide
Marxism: Radical alternative or totalitarian relic?

“We need look for an alternative to the current system, but if we do so under the flag of communism we are bound to fail.” “Class is not somehow disappearing, it is becoming more and more brutally pronounced.” Continuing the debate series “Europe talks to Europe”, Jiri Pehe (Czech Republic) met Benedict Seymour (UK) in Brno to discuss Marxism as “critical divide” between eastern and western Europe. Moderated by Marek Seckar, editor of Host.

Marek Seckar: Let me share with you a personal experience. In the early 1990s, when I considered myself a radical environmentalist, it occurred to me for the first time that I should delimit my position on the social and political scale. I absolutely rejected the idea that I should place myself on the left of the political spectrum. In our milieu at the time, the word “left” was so hopelessly discredited that it was absolutely impossible to connect it with the goals we wanted to achieve. For some time, I tried to reconcile the irreconcilable and imagine some feasible form of rightist eco−radicalism, until I found that I wasn't able to find a solution. So I practically abandoned these considerations, along with any activities in the field of environmentalism.

Now, twenty years later, we are possibly better able to approach these dilemmas. It is clear, I think, that the standpoints of the western intellectual, who historically naturally gravitates to the left, and his eastern counterpart, who tends to identify with the liberal right, have gradually been converging. This is logical: the more time we spend together, the more we share and the more we understand each other. In the former eastern bloc, we have always been convinced that our historical experience is unique and non−transferable. But, at the same time, we have to admit that other experience is equally unique. It may be that we cannot understand others’ experience, but I think it is worth a try. This is what we are aiming at in this debate.

Benedict Seymour: There are so many ways to begin the discussion, so I will try and characterize my own position partly from my concrete experience. I have worked on issues of regeneration and gentrification in inner cities, and in London principally. And what that research has brought to my attention is the nature of contemporary capitalism as having a very distinctive and historically unprecedented character. Capitalism is not a permanent or continuous state of affairs, it is a historical−social form: it has a past, a future, maybe one day it will be a historic form, a past form. At present, as far as I can see, capitalism is increasingly defined by an imperative to consume its own resources, its own future and also its past.
When you study regeneration you are continually encountering the way that neoliberal capitalism has had to loot its own inheritance, be it physical, environmental, mental, but also the resources of labour, the resources of intellect, of intellectual property. Neoliberalism has needed to raid its own past and to a degree to start to undermine its own ability to expand and reproduce itself by raiding its future: its younger generations, its students, its precarious workers. I think the current crisis shows that process of looting coming to a deadlock. Twenty years after the triumph of capitalism, we have the crisis of the neoliberal mode of accumulation, arguably. My position is one that sees in the current moment the possibility of a rendezvous with Marxism as it was not experienced or practiced in the so-called communist period or by the so-called socialist movement. I try to synthesize Loren Goldner's theorisation of social non/reproduction with Theorie Communiste's idea of the non/reproduction of the capital relation.

Neoliberalism has forced a lot of left-liberal and social democratic thinkers to embrace or look back fondly on aspects of social democracy. Whereas I think that actually the Marxist thing here would be to see what's specific about the current conjuncture, and what it calls for. My theory is that we can't go back to a rehabilitated capitalism with a human face: there is no opportunity. I think we are seeing already in some of the struggles taking place the impossibility or undesirability of that route. We saw in the late nineties and through much of the last decade an anti-globalization movement and other movements that expressed the desire for there to be something else. Margaret Thatcher's statement that "there is no alternative" has turned out to be correct, but this time for capitalism. We saw the phase where communism was written off the agenda, where "there is no alternative to neoliberalism, to the market". What we are finding now is that there is no alternative to something other than capitalism. We are confronting a situation where it is either communism or a process of intensified barbarism — a kind of race downwards. All of the old toolkit of capitalism, including socialism, social democracy, so-called communism, is defunct: it can't fix capitalism anymore.

**Jirí Pehe:** I agree with some of your points. I do think that capitalism in its current form is cannibalistic and consumes its own resources. I think that the breaking point came around 1989, when the Eastern Bloc collapsed, and the very concept of capitalism and liberal democracy changed. Until then, liberal democracy was a system that enjoyed a degree of internal stability because it had a very powerful enemy. After 1989, the door opened globally to the expansion of this system of liberal democracy. Yet what we have seen is the global expansion of capitalism, which in its global form is attached to democracy as we know it.

Of course, I will probably not agree with you about the value of liberal democracy. I think that we need to preserve liberal democracy as a form of political organization. At the same time, it is clear that the paradigm of liberal democracy is changing under the pressure of global capitalism. First, it seems to me that global capitalism has significantly altered the very fragile balance between liberty, equality, and fraternity (i.e. solidarity). Second, it has a tendency to colonize the public sphere and in all modern democracies has led to the massive privatization of public goods.

I am not sure whether it is possible to have a capitalism with a human face. I would argue probably not. But I have to confess that I don't know what the alternative is, because the origins of modern democracies are closely tied to the market economy. We don't know of any democratic system that could come
into existence outside the context of a market economy. However that does not mean that capitalism and democracy are — or should be — forever tied. Maybe there is a way to leave this relationship and build a new kind of democracy outside the capitalist system.

But I am not sure that this calls for a return to Marxism. That’s not to say that Marx’s theory does not contain some very useful points. When we speak about our experience, there has been a radical departure from Marxism, of course. However this was a reaction to the communist era: a reflexive and to some extent rather unfortunate reaction. By rejecting all things leftist, we lost twenty years of discourse on these issues. Everything was lumped together: Marxism, Marxist–Leninism, the social democratic Left as represented by the critics and reformers of Marxist theory — [Eduard] Bernstein and suchlike — and then of course leftist liberalism. I think we are still trying to cope with this.

What I see as the biggest problem is that we have no public discourse in the Czech Republic and in most other post-communist countries, with the exception perhaps of Slovenia and maybe Hungary — which didn’t have the same traumas that we had. We have had no debate in this country about the system as such: the system we adopted in 1989 is sacred. We are able to criticize the system from within, but we are not able to criticize it from the outside. This is maybe emerging partly, but it is twenty years too late.

In our public discourse there is also a confusion of notions and terms: liberalism is frequently confused with neoliberalism, conservatism with neo-conservative ideas. I think the reason for this is that the whole public debate was subjected to ideological precepts and notions — in a very unfortunate way, I should add. In the same way that ideology was instrumentalized under the previous system — in a very cynical way — it is being used now, only the plusses and minuses have changed. We are in a situation that prevents us having an open discussion about the system itself.

**MS:** Was communism a Romantic idea, a Romantic approach to history and to human destiny? Or is it a rational, thought-through and working system?

**BS:** I would say that Marxism *does* come from Romanticism: historically Marx emerges from the Romantic critique of the Enlightenment. But he doesn’t remain within Romanticism — although arguably capitalism does. For me, Marxism manages to pose a critique of post-Enlightenment, industrial, capitalist market society. Marxist writings contain a critique that could only emerge through Romanticism. More concretely, it seems to me that Marx sees in capitalist society a kind of metaphysical, mad, inverted world. He therefore complicates the picture of capitalism as rational. The whole point is that capitalism is profoundly *irrational,* but in a way that is scrupulously and narrowly rational. Marx is interesting because he manages to think this strange combination of rationality and irrationality.

What I am trying to get at is the idea that communism has not yet existed; that what was called communism in the twentieth century was not worthy of the name. But the possibility of the communist society is still something that capitalism secretes. Capitalism, to paraphrase Amadeo Bordiga, is an inverted phenomenology of communism. It is very basic to Marx that communism would not be just the antitheses, the black to the white of capitalism, but the realization of something that is already there, latent in capitalism.
Capitalism’s normal function is romantic, it is dependent on the mobilization of the national myths, of personal and social mythologies and fantasies. As we enter a crisis, we are likely to see capitalism become more romantic. As we have seen in the past, in the 1930s for example, there is a great romanticism to a society that has passed its sell-by-date, as it keeps rehearsing these melodramas of final collapse − which are dangerous because we are the ones cast in these dramas. We should not be complacent. In the current crisis, capital is already showing signs of reaching for some of those old Romantic motifs − the nation-state is coming to the fore, the rhetoric of globalization and diversity is ebbing slightly. I’m speaking about the UK, but we can see comparable tendencies in eastern Europe.

JP: I agree with the criticism of capitalism, especially in its global form. I also agree each system has a tendency to justify its existence by creating romantic myths about itself. But I would argue that history does not repeat itself, and if it does, it repeats itself as a farce. Any kind of revival of communism is, in my opinion, virtually impossible. Even if we go back to original Marxism and argue that what was realized in the Soviet Union and Eastern Bloc was not really communism, but state capitalism or whatever, we would still have a problem. It would be like arguing that if we start reading Nietzsche properly we could create a better kind of Nazism. I’m not trying to be flippant. I’m just saying that this is a problem with public discourse. History has run its course and has assigned interpretations to certain notions: communism, Nazism and so on.

I think that we need look for an alternative to the current system, but if we do so under the flag of communism we are bound to fail, simply because the whole discourse will be juggling with notions that have been discredited. Whether or not they should have been discredited is a different question.

BS: I agree that it is impossible and undesirable to repeat twentieth-century "communism". But I don’t believe that there is a historical sell-by-date on ideas, that we can say "Right Spinoza’s done, Nietzsche has had it". History is more dynamic than that and so are ideas. More concretely, I don’t think that any new movement would want to or be able to revive the rhetoric, the structures, or the iconography of communism, the ideological ensembles of twentieth century socialism or state capitalism.

Nowhere did Marx define how communism is to be done — this is something you have to read into Marx. When he talks about communism as real movement, as a real social movement, he is not talking about an ideologically articulated programme, à la Lassallean socialism, Stalinism, or one of the twentieth-century variants on socialism. Rather, it’s a movement of the working class, as the class that can only really realise its potential by abolishing itself and capital. This is not something that was very frontal in twentieth-century socialism. In fact, to borrow a phrase from the group Theorie Communiste, it affirmed working class identity, the heroic socialist worker — the affirmation of labour in the name of abolishing labour. So you can go back to Marx’s theory and find there an as yet unrealized preposition: that is the self-abolition of the working class as the form of value, as the source of value, but also as that which puts value in question. These are not ideas that Stalinists had much time for: they wanted you to go and work.

We cannot any longer make the mistake that the socialist movements of the twentieth century made, because people won’t go for it. That’s the bottom-line. It is not what you or I say, or what intellectuals say, it’s about how people
make communism, or do communization, if you like, now. I look at what's going on in Greece, for example, and I do not see people saying, "I am a worker, I am part of the working class — together, brothers, we must get together, unite and smash capitalism". That discourse doesn't exist and I don't want to revive it. I don't think that the population at large does or will — and that is a good thing. But I don't think it's the same thing as saying "there is no way that communism is on the agenda".

**JP:** How would you define the communism you are dreaming about?

**BS:** I think one of the key things in Marxism is the emphasis on negativity. You can see how bogus the Stalinist-communist model is in its tendency to fall back on the bourgeois habit of projecting utopias and then trying to approximate to them. Which, strangely enough, is parallel to the average working life of the exploited proletarian. You must meet the target, you must fulfil the five year plan — always a utopia. I think Marxism is anti-utopian in that respect; we start with what we've got and we negate it.

Having said that, you can imagine a few basic negations: value, the market, exchange, production for exchange; all of these things are obsolete and a check on human social reproduction. That's one way of putting it. The world just cannot take much more of this, the environment cannot take more of this; that is again the negative argument. Positively, you can see the signs of our ability to organize and to produce and expand the reproduction of society in many things: technology, ideas, intellectual forces of production if you like — we have a lot of potential, which is being destroyed on an expanding scale.

My programme would be an anti-programme. Again, to use Theorie Communiste's terms, the twentieth century produced a lot of programmes; programmatism is arguably the form that the labour-affirming kind of socialism took. It might be a good thing that we can't come up with a programme like that anymore. Again, if communism is immanent in capitalism, then maybe we don't need to elaborate a proposal. Take Greece — young students, the 600-euro generation, facing unemployment, no guaranteed jobs. All the promises of — supposedly — developed neoliberal society suddenly don't look as if they are going to be kept. People start to act, they don't necessarily need an intellectual leader, or a vanguard, or a party, or a discourse to show the way. Where I think we can help is by sharpening the analysis: encouraging people not to run back into the arms of those forms of representation: parties, unions, intellectuals, Slavoj Zizek! There’s plenty to do.

**JP:** Communism — at least in Marxist theory, in the original theory — was a very bourgeois programme, because it worked with the basic Enlightenment idea, namely progress. I think what is being questioned today is the very idea of progress as we have practiced it. The basic idea behind communism was that, through progress in science, technology, the economy, society will be so affluent that everyone will have enough. Maybe part of that has been achieved in certain societies through technology and so on, but it is not anything that could be considered global.

I think it is this idea of progress that today has placed us at the brink of global environmental and economic disaster. It seems to me that unless we totally redefine the idea of communism, and somehow separate it completely from what is inherently present in Marxism, or at least the way that Marxism is understood by most people, we won't get very far. As I said, I don't exactly know what the alternative is, and I agree with you it is not going to be
capitalism with a human face, it is probably something beyond that: I call it "Third Way", although I do not know what that third way will be.

BS: I don't think you can take the idea of progress, which pre−exists Marx, and which he is one of the first people to construct a strong critique of, and then pin that on Marx's thought. In fact the whole point of Marxism is that bourgeois progress is a sham. You only have to read the Manifesto to see that he's practicing a brilliant kind of irony, both celebrating the achievements of capitalism, seeing this enormous productivity, and then saying, look, it turns people into paupers who can't survive unless they sell their hides on the market place — it's a continual satirical assault on bourgeois progress.

Equally, what makes Marx's critique stronger is that he doesn't do the contemporary counter−ideology of progress, which is: "There can be no progress, it's only ecological doom or maybe some Third Way we can't define." The basis of the communist argument, or Marx's argument for communism, is not a linear continuation of production. Marx stresses that you have to destroy the value form and the economic relationships of capitalism. It's not "do capitalism very hard until it's communism!" That is the essence of the social democratic distortion of Marx's thought, I would say. If you go back to the critique of the Gotha programme and what Marx wrote about early socialism, he is saying, "I am against work, work is not the answer — work will not set you free".

JP: That's exactly it. We have these twin approaches born in Enlightenment: the bourgeois idea of progress and the Marxist idea of progress. Both are very economistic, both foresee a future that is very affluent. Bourgeois progress is conceived in terms of the necessity of social−economic inequality — all these neoliberal theories we have today are a continuation of that. Basically they are saying we have to have the engine that creates the wealth, and when we have enough wealth we can distribute it to more and more people. However what is not considered is the possibility that there may not be enough to distribute, because in the process everything that creates wealth will be destroyed.

In the Marxist idea of progress — and maybe I am influenced by my experience — only the means of reaching the final destination of affluent society are different: more rational planning, more rational distribution, no proletariat and bourgeoisie but the same final aim. I think that both these theories basically work with similar notions. As I said, I don't want to discard Marxism wholesale; I think there are some useful approaches. But as a social theory it is not workable anymore. In the twenty−first century we will have to look for something that goes beyond it.

MS: No theory has been implemented so many times in so many different versions. It is obvious that all these implementations have been failures. Doesn't this point towards a problem inherent in the system, at its very core?

BS: I think if Marxism was a system, if Marx had written this thing called: "How to do communism", and people had kept trying to do it and it still had not worked, then you would be completely right. But it isn't a system: there is no "How to do communism" in Marx's writings. It is very important to get one's head round the idea that Marx isn't saying "this is how you do it". He is continuously observing the development of the new historical actor that he has theorised, the working class, but he also had to re−theorize. It is not like there is some kind of programme, some Kantian, a priori schema of communism that Marx lays down and then everyone messes up for the next hundred years.
The codification of Marxism by people like Engels, and also Lassalle and Bernstein, who take what is actually a complex analysis of the movement of capital and turn it into a kind of ideology or system, a metaphysic, is, I think, extremely alien to Marx.

I can see where the possibility arises for such a slippage: one shouldn't pretend that Marx has been completely misinterpreted. There are chinks, moments in his writing where he sounds much more deterministic, more programmatic or, for that matter, more statist: in *1848* or the *Communist Manifesto*, it sounds like communism is just going to happen, almost by the logic of capital unfolding itself in some kind of Hegelian way. But later on in his work you see more emphasis on the contingency in this process: he talks about the mutual destruction of the contending classes. It doesn't have to work out well, it can work out very, very badly. Again this is quite unusual for someone who has supposedly got some *a priori*, utopian schema that should be fulfilled like a recipe.

Because of capitalism's own crisis, its own contradictions, Marxism was a useful tool that was instrumentalized by the ruling class as a way to make capitalism sustainable. But that doesn't exhaust Marx's theory — in fact, it leaves the substantial part of it untouched. To begin with an understanding of Marxism that is completely coloured by a social democratic or Stalinist cartoon would be like saying that Nietzsche says that fascism is the only viable social form. But to be honest, I wouldn't give Nietzsche such a poor hearing if I were to have to defend his legacy.

**JP:** That's exactly my point. We can find new and inspiring things in Nietzsche but nothing so inspiring that would justify some new form of Nazism. I think that we should look not only at capitalism but also the other important notions that emerged in the era, which gave birth to capitalism but also to Marxism as a reaction to it: the rise of the nation state, the rise of civil society, the rule of law. All these notions are a part of a package that cannot be separated. What we see today is not only the cannibalizing quality of global capitalism, which has nowhere else to expand and is devouring itself; what we also see is the gradual weakening of nation states, the fact that economic and technological globalization has not been accompanied by the globalization of political institutions. If anything can serve as a check on global capitalism it is a global political architecture. And also, what I would call global civil society.

Talk about class in the Marxian or Weberian sense is becoming obsolete. If we think about the future we should think about it not in terms of class and so on, but in terms of the consequences of modern technologies, and in terms of civil society in the context of globalization. Maybe there is a place for what you call communism, if that is an ideal state where there are no classes anymore, where there will be self-organization of society that will be more humane than what we have now, but again, I'm not sure where it's all headed. Moreover, I'm not sure we will get anywhere by using the language you are suggesting. History shows that it is important to use language that has not been discredited, and this language has been to a large extent discredited and will be very difficult to revive.

**BS:** I find it ironic that you are describing something that is much closer to twentieth-century socialism than I am. You are talking about a programme for a global super state...

**JP:** Not a super state but a global civil society...
BS: A global capitalist coordination that will ensure that something better will happen — some time. Whereas I'm saying that we have to end capitalism. Which is this old Marxist idea that has had no play yet. We don't have to say Marxism or Capitalism, we can just say what people do say, and that is "I don't want to work in a part of the world that has no place for me, I don't want to starve and die." There are material reasons why people take these positions, they don't have to have read Marx. People who have read Marx might be able to provide assistance at certain points, and it might involve deploying a reading of Marx, but the main thing is not to brand an emerging movement in that way. I think that at a certain point you need to grasp the idea that the proletariat does exist and needs to stop existing.

I think that one of Marx's predictions about class is certainly becoming more and more true, which is that the world is becoming increasingly polarized economically. What we have seen in the last 150 years really fulfils what Marx says about the pauperization of the mass of humanity, while the few get richer and richer. The problem is not that class is somehow disappearing, it is becoming more and more brutally pronounced. It is parochial to think that somehow that's all dissolved, that the nation state has dissolved. Nation states remain decisive: the hegemony of the USA globally remains decisive, there are all kinds of ways which you couldn't have capitalism without an organization of nation−states. To propose a better, a weakened form of national hegemony sounds to me like neoliberalism again. Just because it's more recent — although it goes back to before Marx to liberalism — does not make it newer: in fact it's older than Marxism, it's more tired, clapped out, more bankrupt.

We will always speak at cross purposes if the one that speaks for communism is always cast as having the eschatology, and the one who speaks for some kind of modified neoliberalism is miraculously outside a teleology. It seems to me that your position is a replay of the twentieth century one: it comes out as social democracy, it comes out as Stalinism — capitalism does that.

JP: First, I did not argue for a global state or super state as you call it. I argued for a global order. It is the only way to tame this insane economic system that we call global capitalism. And put it out of business and replace it with something else — I don't know what that would be. I'm not calling for a global state but a new global order, which as a first step would be able to ensure at least some kind of decent existence in those parts of the world which, as you put it, have outlived social democratic ideology. Second, Marx's definition of class has nothing to do with the classes we have today. If we do obtain a classless society, it will not come about because one class declares that it no longer wants to be a class and abolishes another class. Whatever we call — called — the proletariat is being put out of business by technology, not by revolution. Marx was locked into the context of his times: he was reacting to a concrete situation in British factories. I personally do not find his theories very useful for explaining the situation today. But I don't want to take away any of your idealism.

BS: I don't think there is any idealism involved in it. Marx is very clear that surplus value is produced by labour and that presupposition seems to me to hold up very well. It is precisely because technology displaces labour power — people, workers — from production that you get a situation where 50 per cent of people don't have any work. So Marx's diagnosis is borne out. It's very utopian or idealistic to think that machines could produce value. If you take anything from Marx you certainly have to begin by arguing that value is produced by human labour: of course that's Adam Smith, it's an old bourgeois
idea that he managed to radicalize and expand and dialectically transform because he doesn't limit it to the point of production. It is simply science fiction that capitalism could work with just technology. You *can* produce without using labour power now, a great many things don't require much work, that's the problem for capitalism: it's obsolete, it's redundant, it does not have anything to *add* except a deformed coordinating role. If you stop producing to expand value and start producing for need, then you can have a lot less work, which means you don't need workers but you can feed people.

We have a perverted situation described quite well by Marx, where half the people have to be on the brink of starvation to produce value for the other half. Nothing that you have said suggests that's changed: rather it's intensified. I don't understand how you can look at the contemporary world and see an obsolescence of an idea of social class and class polarization, bourgeoisie and proletariat. Surely on a global scale that polarization is deepening, and capitalist technology *is* the driver of that, I agree with you.

**JP:** I think capitalism is basically being put out of business by technological and scientific innovations. I think what's going on is that these technologies are actively destroying capitalism — from communication technologies that can produce global networks to technologies that in your opinion can reduce work. But what do we mean by work? If we still mean by work that people still go somewhere and work as machines in a factory of the service sector — then of course. But if we are to consider anything in Marxist theory, then it is the idea of doing something else with ourselves if we are freed from this old concept of work. That may be something that the new technologies are actually contributing to. So technology has this emancipatory quality, there are contradictory elements in this development. There are major changes on the way, something substantial is going on right now — I believe we are living in the middle of a revolution of sorts. Perhaps the final stage will be something close to what Marx envisioned, but it certainly won't be achieved with the means that he proposed.

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