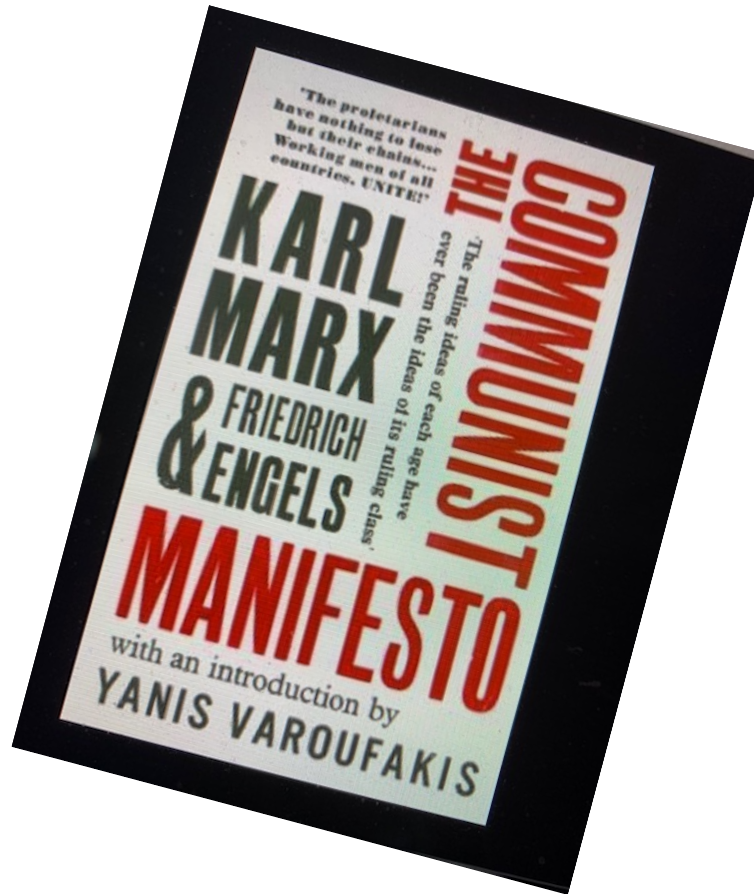


Communists facing up to reality

Tradition



Modern radical or revolutionary socialists, both those inside the British Labour Party, and those who find themselves *in the beyond*, are faced with grasping the vicissitudes of a tradition, which although fractured in a dozen places, continues to command their respect and loyalty.

This communist or socialist tradition, call it what you will, extends from imagined associations with anabaptists, and insurgent peasants, through the Diggers and Levellers of the seventeenth century. It revels in the boldness of embattled Luddites during the early years of machine production, the determination and organisational flair of the Chartists, the heroes of Tolpuddle, and the martyrs of the Paris Commune slaughtered at Père-Lachaise. Then, it

sweeps on to the syndicalists, trade union leaders, and the first Labour politicians of the Edwardian age. It is a heroic past, rich in struggle and incident greatly enlarged in the telling and retelling.

However, this colourful narrative worthy of Bayeux, is merely offered as a preface to the defining events of the twentieth century, the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, the German Revolution a year later, the World Wars, and the fight against fascism. This is because Bolshevism has defined, for all and sundry, what communism is all about for the best part of a century. A great many different stories and accounts have clung to the calcified body of Lenin and Leninism, and a vast literature has been deposited worthy of a lifetime of archaeological sifting through its many layers. The cultivation of revolutionary erudition, bold scholarship, and perpetual excavation, has done much to maintain the appearance of continuity, conferring a kind of ersatz vitality to something as dead as a parrot.

For a time, the virtues of Trotsky and Trotskyism, of anti-fascism – Cable Street, Madrid, Barcelona, Stalingrad – and national liberation movements, provided much needed life-support to the communist tradition in all its instantiations and variety. These trends and struggles lent a Manichean aspect to the battle between capitalism and communism, in which the communist tradition was thought to be alive and well, a worthy opponent of Wall Street and Mammon.

Of course, it all came tumbling down in the late 1980s, when the dictators in the Kremlin attempted to stimulate their stagnating economy by introducing the freedom to criticise, together with experiments in market socialism. The Trotskyists of various hues had hoped for workers' revolts against the Stalinist tyrannies in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. They were to be disappointed as millions celebrated the end of the Stalinist dictatorships in the streets, whilst disregarding, if not welcoming, the arrival of capitalism.

The anarchists and syndicalists rejoiced at the fall of their old bureaucratic foes, and so did the social democrats of all stripes – they had never wanted anything to do with the Communist Party bosses in the Kremlin or their satraps in Sofia, Bucharest, Warsaw, Tirana, or Budapest. They had, like the Trotskyists, washed their hands of them long ago. So, the fall of what the Stalinists called ‘actually existing socialism’ could not possibly affect the resolute opponents of barrack socialism.

This is what they all thought.

Despite the disintegration of their bureaucratic police states, even the Stalinists thought that Stalingrad and the defeat of fascism would stand them in good stead. Whilst their merciless enemies within the same tradition, the Trotskyists, Social Democrats, and Anarchists, were all convinced that the fall of the dictators would open up great opportunities for the renovation and renewal of the tradition, free from the blood that had besmirched the noble ideas of human solidarity and emancipation for which the communist tradition stood proud.

However, we now know, thirty years after the ‘fall of communism’, that nothing vital or alive remains of this tradition. It is true, of course, that bureaucratic communist dictatorships continue to rule the roost in China, Vietnam, North Korea, Belorussia, and Cuba. However, they are a hybrid lot, mixing state control of trade and industry, with various elements of ‘market socialism’, buttressed by the resolute denial of free elections, free trade unions, and freedom of speech. They are states ruled by the all-seeing eye of the party, the bureaucracy, and the plenipotentiary powers of the political police pioneered by Lenin in Petrograd during December 1917.¹

Although this communist tradition was, from the outset, scarred by the arbitrary rule of decrees promulgated by arbitrarily assembled authorities, committees, commissions, and commissars. It also

¹ Leonard D. Gerson, *The Secret Police in Lenin's Russia*, Philadelphia: Templeton University Press, 1976.

claimed a heritage of popular engagement with workers and peasants that were thought, in some sense, to have authorised the establishment of this dictatorship. But, subsequent mass revolts and armed resistance, torture, executions, show trials, imprisonment in labour camps, and enforced exile, soon knocked the gilt off this proletarian gingerbread.

And yet, and yet, those ensnared by this revolutionary socialist tradition, despite all evidence to the contrary, could not help hankering after the “Gains of the Revolution”, the rational kernel in the Stalinist nut, the critical democratic aspect of Vladimir Ilych Lenin’s decrees, and Leon Trotsky, the prophet ‘armed’ and ‘unarmed’. Mao Zedong and Fidel Castro had their good points, Che Guevara rode a motor bike in his youth, and Havana has lots of frayed tumbled-down charm, even if Pol Pot did make us all duck for cover – “Nothing to do with us governor!” Yet, we can still admire the audacious architects of Venezuela’s Bolivarian Revolution, queues, food shortages, and mass emigration, notwithstanding.

Beholden to the State

“The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”

[The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte.
Karl Marx 1852]

When Marx wrote these lines, he was talking about the transient costumes and historical references made by revolutionaries in the heat of social transformation, which ebb away as entirely novel relations take firm hold of society. For us, however, confronted by the revolutionary socialist tradition of the twentieth century we can see nothing but “dead generations” and the “nightmare” of a tradition that has repeatedly shed its skin, only to reappear, as dead and unchanged as it was before its apparent metamorphosis.

Why this endless repetition? Why this endless argy-bargy between Trotskyists and Stalinists? Why the troubled alliances, fraught with distrust, between communists and left social democrats? Why the spitting between anarchists and the rest?

I think the reason is to be found in the failure to face up to the decisive defeat of state-socialism. While the anarchists need the state in order to sweep it away, the revolutionary socialists, all of them, need the state, in one form or another, to be the owner and organiser of the economy. Despite the disasters of Bolshevism, of Stalinism, of Mao and his 'Great Leaps', and Fidel and his vast harvests of sugar, the state still holds pride of place in the imaginary world of the communist imaginary. The state, run by communist officials and advisors is still conceived as the institution which will direct all enterprises, and the economy as a whole, on behalf of the working class.

This is the only answer the revolutionary socialist tradition has to offer bourgeois society. It has, of course, been finessed over the years with talk of co-ops and 'market socialism', but the central instrument, in the minds of revolutionary socialists, for gathering and deploying economic data, and making decisions, remains the state.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this reliance upon the state is the lengths which the socialist left has gone to blank or completely ignore the extensive debates about markets and liberty fielded by anti-communists, starting with Ludwig Von Mises, who published *Socialism: an economic and sociological analysis*,² as long ago as 1922.

Following the lead of Von Mises, many other prominent economists and sociologists have argued for the best part of a century, that leaving all productive property, and all critical economic decisions, in the hands of the state cannot fail to undermine the freedom of the individual. The argument of this school of thought is that, robbed of the potential to own

² Ludwig Von Mises, *Die Gemeinwirtschaft: Untersuchungen über den Sozialismus*, Jena: Gustav Fischer, 1922.

property, and of their capacity to make their own decisions regarding occupation, employment, and trade, people, cannot be free.³

The second aspect to this argument is that the state and its officials, any state, and any officials, cannot possibly gather sufficient timely information regarding the distribution of resources – labour and materials – or for information regarding the demand for specific goods and services, and the determination of their quality and prices.

Now, socialist objections to this kind of argument regarding property, in a situation when most people do not possess any productive property, are often couched in cynical asides and guffaws about the scope of private property and the inequality perpetuated by inheritance. A similar approach regarding market relations is also adopted, particularly regarding the self-evident market failure in housing, health insurance, or education.

So, the revolutionary attachment to state property and state economic management is insisted upon, regardless of the objections of anti-communists; regardless of the dispossession of the peasantry and the working class in Russia, regardless of the abolition of commerce in Cambodia, regardless of the fact that wherever private property has been abolished and the state placed in the economic saddle, brutal tyrannies have always arisen.

What is more, revolutionary socialists have never been able to set out or explain the means by which the workers' state, the proletarian dictatorship, the peoples' republic (call it what you will), will abolish commercial society – i.e. capitalism – and yet retain the dynamism, innovation, and potential for personal liberty, associated with the pursuit of private profit or the private ownership of productive property. Instead, the socialist left has, more or less from Friedrich Engels onwards, tirelessly argued that “we cannot know what form the socialist economy of the future will

³ Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, 1944, London: Routledge, 2001

take, because that will be in the hands of working people in the future to determine”.

This rather slippery evasion leaves a great deal up to our imagination and trust in the capacity of the state and its officials to decide who will work, where, and at what; leaving it up to the state’s officials and planning boards, to determine the ratio of guns to butter, or machine tools to houses, or barbershops to pubs, or bricks to combs, or toilet roll to shampoo, or steel wire to cinema seats.

It is this refusal to engage, concretely, with the nature of the socialist economy of the future, that accounts for the limpet-like tenacity with which revolutionaries cling to the rock of state control. The idea of nationalisation, state ownership of enterprises, or of entire sectors of the economy, which takes place in capitalist societies is familiar to all. Lenin even conceived of the administration of a socialist economy as on par with the administration of the post office.⁴ It is this familiar model (adopted by most advanced capitalist states), which by extension, is made to stand in for the revolutionary socialist alternative to capitalism.

From Exchange to Use

There is one, only one, essential element in the Marxist critique of capitalism. It is very simple and very plain, but in it are focused all the many-faceted analyses of the capitalist order. It is this: there is a striking contradiction between the increasingly social character of the process of production and the anti-social character of capitalist property. [. . .] This contradiction between the anti-social character of [private] property and the social character of our production is the source of all anarchy and irrationality in capitalism.⁵

⁴ Vladimir Ilych Lenin, *State and Revolution*, 1918, Marxists Internet Archive, 1999.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/staterev/>

⁵ Isaac Deutscher, ‘Marxism in Our Time’, 1965, in *Isaac Deutscher, Marxism, Wars & Revolutions: Essays from four decades*, London: Verso, 1984, pp.251-2.

Capitalism is a society in which commerce, i.e. production for exchange, comes to dominate agriculture, manufacturing, and the creation of services. Goods and services are produced for exchange, so that a profit may be realised on their sale to known and unknown customers. Goods and services that are unable to produce a profit are not made or provided. So, a situation arises in which the 'use values' of a particular good is not uppermost in anybody's mind, independent of the good's capacity to realise a profit on exchange. Of course, products must be usable – they must “do what it says on the tin” – but it is their capacity for the realisation of profit, their exchange value, that leads to their being made and distributed, not their usefulness.

This means that many things which the general population might need – 'use values' – are often not produced commercially because they have little potential to realise a profit when exchanged. Housing for lower-paid workers, health insurance, or education for the great majority of working people, are 'use values' which have little or no possibility of realising a profit for private investors. Consequently, they are either not produced or are produced by a state or related institution when the majority of capitalists deem these goods and services necessary for the performance of profitable activities, but are in themselves, intrinsically unprofitable.

So, a capitalist society is one that is dominated by commerce and its activity – *its productive activity* – is regulated by the demand for particular goods expressed through the market, and the prices of those goods are determined by the level of demand within the market.⁶

Alternatively, the things which have no commercial, or exchange value, are wholly the subject

⁶ Evidently, relations between the market, giant corporations and the state are extremely complicated, requiring detailed study of the ways in which prices are actually determined by, for example, Spotify, Netflix, Airbus, or Apple. Consequently, the simple description set out above, does not take account of concrete expression of market relations.

of political or administrative decisions. Consequently, social housing, public health insurance, most schools and colleges, are provided and financed by public authorities – the level and quality of this provision is determined by political decisions taken locally or nationally, and are not directly subject to the operation of the market.

The Communist Idea

The future for which the Marxists yearn, communism, is as absurd to their detractors as any peasant's [mythological land of plenty]. It is rarely distinctly outlined, but they know it beckons beyond private property and its violence, beyond exploitation and alienation, to a world where technology reduces labour, the better for humanity to flourish. 'The true realm of freedom', Marx's words: 'the development of human powers as an end in itself'. This is what they want.⁷

Now, the communist or revolutionary socialist idea is that the whole of society's economic activity should be organised and determined by what the general population desire to be made and provided. The abolition or replacement of capitalism demands the replacement of the commercial impulse with the social or public impulse. Instead of producing things because of their potential to realise a commercial profit, goods and services will be created and provided in order to meet socially determined desires and socially determined needs.

So, communism or revolutionary socialism aims for the creation of a society in which all decisions concerning what should, and should not, be made, the level of the quality of goods produced, and the nature of the services provided, where individuals will work, at what, and when, will be determined by the whole

⁷ China Miéville, *October: The story of the Russian Revolution*, London: Verso, 2017,

people, by society at large, by means yet to be determined.⁸

This is an intrinsically utopian scheme, because such a society does not exist and has never existed at any time. It presents us, not only with the difficulty of determining how a form of popular democracy could be created that is capable of running, not only individual enterprises, like shops, restaurants, offices, and factories, but also of administering the entire economy – the relations between enterprises, and between enterprises in this country and those in other places scattered across the world.

Problems about the regulation of means of exchange, i.e. the regulation of money, and the determination of quality (the level of quality that goods and services must achieve in order to satisfy the consumer), and the distribution of labour, remain. This is because it is not clear how an economy regulated by popular democratic means, *one in which all economic decisions are political or administrative decisions taken, independently of commodity production for markets, would be able to control quality, regulate the labour supply, or set the prices of labour, raw materials, components, or finished goods and services.*

For these reasons it is clear that our problems, as communists or revolutionary socialists, are considerable.

1. We need to work out how to arrive at a situation in which most working people want to, not only participate in running the enterprises where they work, but also want to work together to plan and regulate the economy as a whole.
2. We need to think about how we might create popular democratic institutions capable of

⁸ The abolition of market relations always implies the abolition of the labour market, consequently, some political or administrative means would need to be established in the regulation and deployment of labour, and the education and training associated with particular occupations.

running individual enterprises, but also of regulating the economy as a whole.

3. We need to think about how, in the absence of the spur of competition between producers, we can constantly improve productivity and quality.
4. We need to work out how we can abolish the private ownership of productive capital in the form of buildings, vehicles, machinery, raw materials, and other capital goods, without intruding upon the private ownership of savings, 'pension pots', and other consumption goods.
5. We need to determine how to avoid the development of state institutions that are destructive of individual liberty and tend as they have always done in the past towards oppression and tyranny.

Because we have, over the years, had no answers to any of these questions we have tended to live in the moment. *Responding to one bloody thing after another*, as if our interventions mattered, and might even have contributed to raising communist standing and support amongst the wider population. This concentration upon activism and intervening in day-to-day struggles has had a therapeutic effect, bolstering revolutionary socialist confidence and enhancing our optimism. It has particularly aided us by helping to distract our attention from the irrelevance of our politics in the wider scheme of things.

Capitalism is not simply a "mode of production". Capitalism is a fully functioning society, *a mode of life*, in which millions of working people unavoidably participate in commercial relations as employees, consumers, and savers. What is more capitalist culture and mores enter into the lives of everyone, dominating cultural production, and shaping the aspirations of millions, determining what is imagined, what is thought to be possible, and what is regarded as impossible.

In the face of the saturation of society by bourgeois values, in the face of such overwhelming odds, we have, like Don Quixote, conjured an imaginary world out of our own traditions, beliefs, and desires. Consequently, we have always denied the utopian aspect of our thinking – convinced of the reality of the windmills at which we tilt, while all the while insisting upon the practical and achievable character of communism.

The difficulty with the notion of “utopia” and “utopian” for us is to be found in a rejection of the, often moralistic, attempts of nineteenth century socialists in deciding to set themselves apart from capitalism by establishing model communities and producer cooperatives.⁹ These attempts invariably failed as capitalist relations inevitably corroded their communitarian practice and finally dissolved the ethos of common sharing proselytised by socialist idealists, particularly in Britain and the United States.

This rejection of the notion of utopia and utopian has been extremely damaging to the communist cause because it has drawn attention away from what would have to be done in order to create a society which does not exist, and has never existed at any time in the past. The various ‘experiments’ conducted by Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Mao, Castro, and others, have, of course, been sustained by illusions about workers’ control, worker and peasant republics, popular socialist democracy, and so on.

The truth is that workers’ control never came close to existing in Bolshevik Russia, a society ruled from the outset by arbitrary rule – rule legislated by decrees, issued by fiat, by the leading organs of the communist party and state – the suppression by political police (with secret plenipotentiary powers), of all independent political parties, trade unions, and elected assemblies. This model of rule was emulated

⁹ See: Robert Owen, *A New View of Society: Essays on the Principle of the Formation of the Human Character, and the Application of the Principle to Practice*, 1813, New York: Prism Key Press, 2013. See also: Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1875 and 1892, Moscow, 1978.

throughout the 'people's democracies', and continues to this day in countries where communist *party-states* continue to function.

Consequently, facing up to reality for communists demands that we frankly and proudly embrace the utopian nature of our project, by considering how a society in which democracy is extended from the sphere of bourgeois-democratic politics to that of the management of all productive enterprises, and to economic life as a whole.

This is because without popular democratic regulation of economic life, communism is a meaningless idea.

See Also:

Don Milligan, *Stalinism, Tradition, and the Working Class*, 2015.

Don Milligan, *October 1917: An intoxication with the future*, 2017.

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