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Monthly Review; Apr 1996; 47, 11; ProQuest
pg. 1

REVIEW OF THE MONTH

FIVE THESES ON ACTUALLY EXISTING MARXISM

by FREDRIC JAMESON

(Dedicated to the memory of William Pomerance)

First Thesis

"Postmarxisms" regularly emerge at those moments in which capitalism itself undergoes a structural metamorphosis.

Marxism is the science of capitalism, or better still, in order to give depth at once to both terms, it is the science of the inherent contradictions of capitalism. This means on the one hand that it is incoherent to celebrate the "death of Marxism" in the same breath with which one announces the definitive triumph of capitalism and the market. The latter would rather seem to augur a secure future for the former, leaving aside the matter of how "definitive" its triumph could possibly be.[1] On the other hand, the "contradictions" of capitalism are not some formless internal dissolution, but relatively lawful and regular, and subject at least to theorization after the fact. For example, for any given moment of capitalism, the space it controls will eventually become oversaturated with the commodities it is technically capable of producing. This crisis is then systemic.

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Capitalism is however not merely a system or mode of production, it is the most elastic and adaptable mode of production that has appeared thus far in human history, and has previously overcome such cyclic crises. It has achieved this by means of two basic strategies: the expansion of the system, and the production of radically new types of commodities.

The expansion of the system. Capitalism has always had a center, recently the hegemony of the United States and previously that of England.[2] Each new center is spatially larger and more inclusive than preceding centers, and thus opens up a wider territory for commodification in general, and for new markets and new products alike. According to a somewhat different version of the historical narrative, we can speak of a national moment of capitalism that emerged from the eighteenth century industrial revolution. This first moment is that which Marx himself experienced and theorized, albeit prophetically. It was followed at the end of the nineteenth century by the moment of imperialism, in which the limits of the national markets were burst and a kind of world-wide colonial system established. Finally, after the Second World War and in our own time, the older imperial system was dismantled and a new "world system" set in its place, dominated by the so-called multinational corporations. This current moment of a "multinational" capitalism is uneasily balanced (after the disappearance of the Soviet Union) between the three centers of Europe, the United States, and Japan, each with its immense hinterland of satellite states. This third moment, whose convulsive stages of emergence were not really complete until the end of the Cold War (if then), is clearly far more "global" than the preceding age of imperialism. With the "deregulation" (so to speak) of the immense areas of India, Brazil, and Eastern Europe, there is a scope for the penetration of capital and the market qualitatively greater than in earlier stages of capitalism. Is this then to be considered the definitive achievement of what Marx prophesied as the world market, and thereby the final stage of capitalism—including, among other things, "the universal commodification of labor power"? It is to be doubted. The inner class

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dynamics of the new moment have scarcely had time to work themselves out, in particular the emergence of new forms of labor organization and political struggle appropriate to the scale at which "globalization" has transformed the world of business.

The production of radically new types of commodities. There is a second requirement for overcoming systemic crises: that is, the recourse to innovations and even "revolutions" in technology. Ernest Mandel makes these changes coincident with the stages just described: steam technology for the moment of national capitalism; electricity and the combustion engine for the moment of imperialism; atomic energy and the cybernetic for our own moment of multinational capitalism and globalization, which has come to be labeled by some as postmodernity. These technologies are both productive of new types of commodities and instrumental in opening up new world spaces, thus "shrinking" the globe and reorganizing capitalism according to a new scale. This is the sense in which characterizations of late capitalism in terms of information or cybernetics are appropriate (and very revealing culturally), but need to be recoupled with the economic dynamics from which they tend rather easily to be severed, rhetorically, intellectually, and ideologically.

If the overall lines of this periodization of capital are accepted, it becomes at once clear that the various "post-Marxisms" of, in particular, Bernstein at the turn of the last century or of poststructuralism in the 1980s, along with their posited "crisis" or "death" of Marxism, have been simultaneous with precisely those moments in which capitalism is restructured and prodigiously enlarged. And these in turn have been followed by various theoretical projects of a more modern—or indeed in our time postmodern—Marxism attempting to theorize the new and unexpected dimensions taken on by its traditional object of study, capitalism as such.

Second Thesis

Socialism as a vision of freedom—freedom from unwanted and avoidable economic and material constraints, freedom for collective praxis—is in our time threatened on two

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ideological levels at once: that of "discursive struggle" (in the words of Stuart Hall) in an argument with world-wide Thatcherism about the market system;[3] and that which plays on even deeper anti-Utopian anxieties and fears of change. The two levels clearly imply one another, insofar as the market argument presupposes a set of views about human nature which the anti-Utopian vision then rehearses in more apocalyptic and libidinal ways.

Discursive struggle (as opposed to outright ideological conflict) succeeds by way of discrediting its alternatives and rendering unmentionable a whole series of thematic topics. It appeals to trivialization, naiveté, material interest, "experience," political fear, and historical lessons, as the "grounds" for decisively delegitimizing such formerly serious possibilities as nationalization, regulation, deficit spending, Keynesianism, planning, protection of national industries, the security net, and ultimately the welfare state itself. Identifying this last with socialism then allows market rhetoric to win a double victory, over liberals (in the U.S. usage, as in "New Deal liberals") as well as the Left. The Left is thus today placed in the position of having to defend big government and the welfare state, something its elaborate and sophisticated traditions of the critique of social democracy make it embarrassing to do without a more dialectical understanding of history than much of that Left possesses. In particular, it is desirable to regain some sense of the way historical situations change, and the appropriate political and strategic responses along with them. But this also demands an engagement with the so-called end of history, that is, the fundamental ahistoricality of the postmodern in general.

Meanwhile, the anxieties associated with Utopia, which spring from the fear that everything that makes up our current identity and our current habits and forms of libidinal gratification would disappear under some new social dispensation, some radical change in the societal order, are now far more easily mobilizable than at other moments in the recent past. Evidently, at least in the richer half of the world and not only in the dominant strata, the hope for change of destitute

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people in the modern period has been replaced by the terror of loss. These anti-Utopian anxieties need to be addressed head on, in a kind of cultural diagnosis and therapy, and not evaded by way of consent to this or that feature of the general market argument and rhetoric. All arguments about human nature—that it is basically good and cooperative, or that it is evil and aggressive and requires the taming of the market, if not Leviathan—are "humanistic" and ideological (as Althusser taught us), and should be replaced by the perspective of radical change and the collective project. In the meantime, the left needs aggressively to defend big government and the welfare state, and to continuously attack market rhetoric on the basis of the historical record of the destructiveness of the free market (as Polyani theorized it and Eastern Europe demonstrates).

Third Thesis

But such arguments in their turn presuppose the taking of a position on what is surely the central concept in any Marxian "unity-of-theory-and-practice," namely Revolution itself. This is the case because it is the untenability of that concept that is the principal exhibit in the post- or anti-Marxian arsenal. The defense of this concept, however, requires a number of preliminary preparations: in particular, we need to abandon to iconology everything that suggests that revolution is a punctual moment rather than an elaborate and complex process. For example, many of our most cherished iconic images of the various historical revolutions, such as the taking of the Winter Palace and the Tennis Court Oath, need to be set aside.

Social revolution is not a moment in time, but it can be affirmed in terms of the necessity of change in what is a synchronic system, in which everything holds together and is interrelated with everything else. Such a system then demands a kind of absolute systemic change, rather than piecemeal "reform," which turns out to be what is in the pejorative sense "Utopian," that is, illusory, not feasible. That is to say that the

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system demands the ideological vision of a radical social alternative to the existing social order, something which can no longer be taken for granted or inherited, under the state of current discursive struggle, but which demands reinvention. Religious fundamentalism (whether Islamic, Christian, or Hindu), that claims to offer a radical alternative to consumerism and "the American way of life," only comes into significant being when the traditional Left alternatives, and in particular the great revolutionary traditions of Marxism and communism, have suddenly seemed unavailable.

We must imagine revolution—as something which is both a process and the undoing of a synchronic system—as a set of demands which can be triggered by a punctual or political event such as a Left victory in an electoral struggle or the dismantling of colonial authority, but which then take the form of wider and wider popular diffusion and radicalization. These waves of new popular demands, which emerge from ever deeper layers of the hitherto silenced and deprived population, then radicalize even an ostensibly left government and force ever more decisive transformations on the state. The nation (but in our time the world, as well) is then polarized in the classical dichotomous fashion in which everyone, however reluctantly, must take sides. The question of violence is then necessarily posed: if the process is not really a social revolution it does not necessarily have to be accompanied by violence. But if it is, then the previously dominant side of the dichotomy will of necessity have recourse to violent resistance, and in that sense alone, then, violence (however undesirable) is the outward sign or visible symptom that a genuinely social revolutionary process is in course.

The more basic issue raised here is thus not whether the concept of revolution is still viable, but rather that of national autonomy. We must ask whether, in the world system today, it is possible for any segment of integrated sections to uncouple and delink (to use Samir Amin's term) and then to pursue a different kind of social development and a radically different type of collective project.

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Fourth Thesis

The collapse of the Soviet Union was not due to the failure of communism but rather to the success of communism, provided one understands this last, as the West generally does, as a mere strategy of modernization. For it is by way of rapid modernization that the Soviet Union was thought, even fifteen years ago, virtually to have caught up with the West (an officially anxiety-provoking perspective we can scarcely remember any longer).

Three further propositions need to be affirmed in connection with the collapse of the Soviet Union. The first is that internal social and political disintegration is part of a larger world-wide pattern in the 1980s which has enveloped in a structural corruption both the West (Reaganism and Thatcherism, other parallel forms in Italy and France) and the Arab countries (what Hisham Sharabi calls "neopatriarchy"). It would be misleading to explain causally this structural corruption in moral terms as it springs from the quite material social process of the accumulation of wealth unproductively in the very top layers of these societies. It has become clear that this stagnation is intimately related to what has been known as finance capital as it distances itself and diverges from its origin in production. Giovanni Arrighi has shown that the various moments of capital all seem to know a final stage in which production passes over into speculation, in which value parts from its origin in production and is exchanged more abstractly (something not without its cultural consequences as well).

It must also be stressed that categories like those of efficiency, productivity, and fiscal solvency are comparative ones, that is to say, their consequences come into play only in a field in which several unequal phenomena are competing. More efficient and productive technique drives out older machinery and older plant only when the latter enters its force field and thereby offers or is challenged to compete.

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This leads us to the third point, namely that the Soviet Union "became" inefficient and collapsed when it attempted to integrate itself into a world system that was passing from its modernizing to its postmodern stage, a system that by its new rules of operation was therefore running at an incomparably higher rate of "productivity" than anything inside the Soviet sphere. Driven by cultural motives (consumerism, the newer information technologies, etc.), drawn in by calculated military-technological competition, by the bait of the debt, and intensifying forms of commercial coexistence, Soviet society entered an element in which it could not survive. It may be claimed that the Soviet Union and its satellites, hitherto isolated in their own specific pressure area as under some ideological and socioeconomic geodesic dome, now began imprudently to open the airlocks without spacesuits prepared and thus to allow themselves and their institutions to be subjected to the infinitely more intense pressures characteristic of the world outside. The result can be imagined as comparable to what the sheer blast pressures did to the flimsy structures in the immediate vicinity of the first atomic bomb; or to the grotesque and deforming weight of water pressure at the bottom of the sea on unprotected organisms evolved for the upper air. Indeed, this result confirms Wallerstein's prescient warning that the Soviet bloc, despite its importance, did not constitute an alternative system to that of capitalism, but merely an antisystemic space or zone within it, one now evidently blown away, with only a few surviving pockets in which various socialist experiments are still able to continue.

Fifth Thesis

The Marxisms (the political movements as well as the forms of intellectual and theoretical resistance) that emerge from the present system of late capitalism, from postmodernity, from Mandel's third stage of informational or multinational capitalism, will necessarily be distinct from those that developed during the modern period, the second stage, the age of imperialism. They will have a radically different rela-

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tionship to globalization and will also, by contrast to earlier Marxisms, appear to be more cultural in character, turning fundamentally on those phenomena hitherto known as commodity reification and consumerism.

The increasing significance of culture for both the political and the economic is not a consequence of the tendential separation or differentiation of these realms, but rather of the more universal saturation and penetration of commodification itself, which has now been able to colonize large zones of that cultural area hitherto sheltered from it and indeed for the most part hostile to and inconsistent with its logic. The fact that culture has today largely become business has as a consequence that most of what used to be considered specifically economic and commercial has also become cultural, a characterization under which the various diagnoses of so-called image society or consumerism need to be subsumed.

And in a more general way Marxism enjoys a theoretical advantage in such analysis, namely that its conception of commodification is a structural and a non-moralizing one. Moral passion generates political action, but only of the most ephemeral kind, quickly reabsorbed and recontained and little inclined to share its specific issues and topics with other movements. But it is only by way of such amalgamation and construction that political movements can develop and grow more extensive. Indeed, I am tempted to make the point the other way around, that a moralizing politics tends to develop where a structural cognition and mapping of society is blocked. The influence of the religious and the ethnic today is to be grasped as a rage at the perception of the failure of socialism, and a desperate blind attempt to fill that vacuum with new motivations.

As for consumerism, it may well be hoped that it will turn out to have been as historically significant as it was necessary for human society to pass through the experience of consumerism as a way of life, if only in order more consciously to choose something radically different in its place. But for most of the world the addictions of consumerism will not be objectively available; it then seems possible that the prescient diagnosis of the radical theory of the 1960s—that

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capitalism was itself a revolutionary force in the way in which it produced new needs and desires that the system could not satisfy—will now find its realization on the global scale of the new world system.

On a theoretical level, it may be suggested that the currently urgent issues of permanent structural unemployment, of financial speculation and ungovernable capital movements, of the image society, are all profoundly interrelated on the level of what might be called their lack of content, their abstraction (as opposed to what another age might have termed their "alienation"). The more paradoxical level of the dialectic is met when we rejoin issues of globalization and informatization. There is a seemingly intransigent dilemma when the political and ideological possibilities of the new world networks (on the left as well as in business or on the right) are then coupled with the loss of autonomy in the world system today and the impossibility for any national or regional area to achieve its own autonomy and subsistence or to delink or uncouple itself from the world market. Intellectuals cannot find a way through this passage by the mere taking of a thought. It is the ripening of structural contradictions in reality that produce the dawning anticipation of new possibilities: yet we can at least keep this very dilemma alive by "cleaving to the negative" as Hegel might have said, by keeping alive that place from which the new can be expected, unexpectedly, to emerge.

NOTES

1. The "critique of political economy" never wished to be a science in the sense in which "political economy" was itself conceived, let alone academic forms of "economics." That is, as "critique" it isolates the basis of the error it identifies, rejecting a radical discontinuity between theory and practice, facts and values.
2. Following Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (London, New York: Verso, 1994) in sequence the Spanish-Genoese moment, the Dutch supersession, the English empire, the U.S. hegemony, and beyond that the possibility of the prospect of the Japanese supremacy.
3. "Discursive struggle" in this usage is struggle for control of the terms and rules of the discourse.

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