

POOR OLD MARX

Marcin KULA

Leon Kozminski University, Warsaw
j.m.kula-na-uw.edu.pl

Abstract: The present paper aims to discuss about the posterity of this classic of the Left, to underline the failures of an utopia almost never sustained by the historical realities. Its only success was to be adopted by an ideology whose regimes illustrated themselves by crime, terror, famine against their citizens.

Keywords: Marx, Marxism, historical development, failure.

The above title was inspired by a French children's poem which goes more or less like this: "Pauvre Charlmagne, il avait cette idée folle qu'il a inventé l'école". Paraphrasing this text, which I quote from memory, I would like to say: "Pauvre Charles Marx, il avait cette idée folle qu'il a inventé sa vision du monde".

If in summing up a person's life we included the posthumous fate of their ideas and memory of them, then Marx could surely be considered one of the more tragic figures of today's world. As a philosopher, he dreamt of making the world a better place – and today in many places he is seen as a patron of misery. By and large, his ideas did not work in practice. He would make an ideal hero of a Greek tragedy, although it is highly improbable such a tragedy will ever be written.

Marxism was a philosophical theory that was meant to change the face of the Earth – but one that was not sufficiently down to earth. True, many of Marx's observations can be defended; many phenomena can be explained in Marxist terms. What failed was their global and universal application. Its basis was the transformation theory, which held that humankind goes through successive stages of social development, known as formations: the primitive tribal community, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. The problem is that history does not bear out this succession. In various regions and countries this sequence of formations has not been ascertained. In many cases, their elements mix with each other and their sequence is different than postulated by Marx. In historical reality, "pure" formations have practically never been encountered. A significant portion of possible transitions between the formations cannot be explained using Marxist theory. Marx's formations may possibly serve as heuristic models – but no more than that.

However, the predominant part of the Earth evolved along an entirely different route than Western Europe, which served as the basis on which this

scheme was – better or worse – designed. This was actually something Marx realised. In order to overcome this difficulty, Marx developed yet another – the “Asian” or “hydraulic” – formation. The name was interesting, but there was still one problem, namely that Marx did not notice that his “Asian” or “hydraulic” group inadvertently included the history of the larger part of humanity.

One can also point out other problems with the theory of formations. Even if we assumed that the history of each and every nation really did progress along the same path, Marxist theory offers no explanation for why certain nations progressed faster and others slower or why even among countries in the same closely connected area, some became industrial powers while others remained their agricultural and raw-material suppliers. Or why even our continent has become divided into a “first class” and “second class” Europe, to say nothing of the division into first, second, and third worlds.

When developing his theory, Marx did not pay much attention to the question of economic underdevelopment, the national question, the peasant question and the question of democracy – because these issues were not the fundamental ones in the developed Europe of the 19th century. At the heart of Marx’s vision of future change was the working class which – created by the bourgeoisie as a result of industrial development – was to sweep that bourgeoisie off the face of the earth with a wave of socialist revolution.

History did not bear out this element of Marx’s vision, even in highly-developed Western Europe. Despite Marx’s expectations, the proletarians of various countries did not in fact unite against the bourgeoisie. On the contrary – in 1914 they took up arms against each other. They didn’t start a world revolution, but even without it they ceased to be pariahs who have nothing to lose but their chains (speaking of which, is it really those – or mostly those – who have nothing to lose who start revolutions?). Proletarians generally stopped occupying the social position and playing the social role they possibly had in Marx’s time. In developed societies, their place as the bottom class was sometimes taken by immigrants – but immigrants differ sharply in the way they defy, and possibly rebel against, the receiving society.

Society did not split into two opposing classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, as Marx had foretold. Quite the opposite happened: the rise of the middle class, as well as of a huge sector of trade and services.

If something united on a global scale, then it was capital – although it only did so after two world wars. Over time it became clear that contrary to Marx’s supposition workers do love their homelands, whereas it is capital that is stateless. If we were to assume for a moment that the Soviet Union was a country of the proletarian masses, then its World War Two alliance with countries which Marxist terminology defined as bourgeois against another bourgeois country was yet another paradox. Naturally, it is debatable whether the USSR was really a proletarian state (although I personally believe that the Russian proletariat, such as it was, actually had a much bigger influence over Soviet life than is generally thought today). Naturally, it is also debatable whether the system of alliances that

finally formed during World War Two was not the result of coincidence or the ravings of a sick mind. One could finally ask whether the consequential political decisions of those times can even be considered in Marxian terms.

Another great paradox of the practice of Marx's theory was the fact that Marxism was implemented almost exclusively in underdeveloped countries where industrial capitalism was weak. It was built in countries where the important issues were economic development, modernising social relations, religious thought, the national existence and the position of the peasants. It is worth asking why it was in these countries that Marx's thought was implemented. When pressed to explain this, Lenin developed the idea of the "weakest link" of capitalism; it was this link which allegedly broke. However, this concept at most explains the situation in Russia in 1917. The socialist transformation of Eastern Europe (with the exception of Albania and Yugoslavia) doesn't require any explanation – it is enough to recall that it was concurrent with the appearance of the Red Army's tanks. Cuban communism can also be explained through the existence of a similar element – the policy of the United States. What the concept of the "weakest link" cannot explain is communism in Asia.

It also remains debatable whether even in the case of Russia the only factors that have to be taken into consideration are the feeble resistance put up by the Russian establishment in 1917, a system that was coming apart and the almost universal wartime desperation. At least as important to the development of events was the position of the broadly defined intelligentsia class. As usual in a backward country, the Russian intelligentsia consisted of a mass of frustrated people whose ideas and concerns were totally different from the majority of the population. This was the revolutionary force that became the fuse when it encountered a reservoir of social and possibly national frustration. I suspect that a basically similar model – embellished with all the local nuances – was realised in China. Many Latin American countries were also marked by similar patterns of rebellion and revolution.

Lenin hated Tsarist, backward, peasant Russia. He overthrew it – and then, together with his comrades, attempted to modernise it and industrialise it and make it into a new Manchester. Stalin was against "bowing to the West" ("niskopokłonstwu pieried Zapadom"), but in fact in the area of industry he copied everything from the West (by stealing industrial designs, frequently through espionage). His successors followed in his tracks in this area *per fas et nefas* with such fervour that they didn't even notice that heavy metallurgy was ceasing to dominate as a mechanism of world development. And anyway, this development – selective and fragmentary, not bringing with it new spiritual and material ideas, grandiose, created numerous pitfalls. The production of the tiny Polish Fiat automobile certainly did not require communism, and Chernobyl served as an ample reminder of the dangers of a policy of selective development.

The communists did not always have to move toward modernisation of the "base" (a Marxian term) and European-style industrialisation. China's post-revolutionary policies were probably much less consistent and constant in their development

aspects, while the rulers of Cambodia (the Red Khmer) were nationalistic – but opposed to modernisation. Eastern Europe, however, followed this path.

The paradox of the development of Marx's ideas was the position of workers under socialism - which did, after all, treat him as its prophet. The system which was to bring an end to the alienation of labour gave rise to a situation where in the working class, which supposedly ruled, actually had no influence over either the actual rulers or over labour relations. Trade unions, integrated with the party/state apparatus, were intended to pass information from the government to the masses and look after social services. The Marxists fought against various forms of mandatory worker identification booklets used under capitalism, claiming they were an instrument used to oppress the workers, but the Polish People's Republic had its own version (with workplaces putting their stamps in personal IDs). There are many more such examples.

That is not to say that workers, or workers and peasants, or finally peasants who became workers had no influence whatsoever over the political system. The issue was much more complicated. Earlier I said that that the proletarian masses had a much bigger actual influence over Soviet life than is generally thought today – and I stand by my words. It was just that this influence was indirect – manifesting itself mostly as an impact on the national mentality. Socialism became similar to a religion also because the people, brought up in a religious atmosphere, had taken power and entered the palaces of the rulers. Many people in the USSR really liked the style of art promoted by Zhdanov. Stalinism was the product of the working people of the USSR's cities and villages. Most of the generals in the Polish armed forces at the end of communism came from the people (to keep using the term). At the same time, Stalin destroyed the people, and the army – commanded by the “people's generals” – shot people in the streets of Poland. Both things were true.

The working class, allegedly liberated by socialism, dreamed of nothing but the West and the material wealth which symbolised it. True, maybe the workers' image of the West was naive – precisely because it was contrasted with their own poverty. Perhaps they mistook the black-market value of the dollar for its actual worth. Still, the fact remains that it was the capitalist West and not the socialist East that served as the point of reference. There was a little story told before 1989 – surely anecdotal – of two workers looking at a Marks & Spencer sign, and one saying to the other, “This is the only Marx I believe in”.

Contrary to what Marx had predicted, socialism did not cause people to abandon religion. Quite the contrary. Also, national values generally outweighed internationalist ones, and the communist authorities themselves were at times simply jingoistic. And frequently so were their policies – even though the front pages of party newspapers and magazines bore the slogan “Proletarians of all countries, unite”. As an additional paradox, the authorities of the Polish People's Republic frequently feared the USSR.

The fundamental paradox from the Marxist point of view was the way out of communism – at least in Poland. It was paradoxical not just because the workers rose up against a system that was based on Marxism, but because this struggle can largely be explained using Marx's transformation model. What had happened in Poland between 1945 and 1981? The party and state apparatus that replaced the bourgeoisie from Marx's model had built up a heavy industry and formed concentrated masses of workers. These workers produced an added value, much of which was taken over by the state, represented that very apparatus. In accordance with Marx's theses on the revolutionary potential of the working class, this class rebelled and deposed the state apparatus ("bourgeoisie") – although in the name of capitalism. Interestingly, this revolution finally proved the existence of a supra-national proletarian community: labour unions as well as individuals from various countries provided assistance to the Polish unionists.

The above picture is naturally both exaggerated and simplified. It should take into account the role of two factors which played a very important role in the transformation and which Marx did not consider in his model: the struggle for national emancipation and religious thinking. However, much of the above model paradoxically came to mark the 1980s.

Another paradox in relation to Marxian thought is the fact that it was a workers' revolt that attained capitalism with all its inherent social contrasts. Moreover, Solidarity initially provided a protective umbrella to the strongly negative aspects of the transformation; later on the union became, to a large extent, marginalised, so as not to stand in the way of transformation. Today numerous Poles live below the "social minimum" level, and the role of trade unions in many workplaces is negligible. Maybe this situation will improve along with the development of capitalism in Poland, as it once improved in the West.

Here we come to another, final – at least for now – paradox connected to the history of Marxist thought. This paradox is that Marxism, having inspired the communist episode in the history of humankind, also thereby contributed to bettering the lot of the working class in the West (and thus caused itself to become insufficient as an instrument for describing Western reality). It is probably no coincidence that the welfare state is going out of fashion, and some regions of the world are left to fend for themselves at a time when communism is no longer available as a viable system alternative. Of course, it is not the only reason for these occurrences.

Is the Marxian-Communist episode in history truly over and done with? Such a question is of course difficult to answer; we don't know what the future will bring. History has seen renaissances of various schools of thought and various forms of action. Today, it seems unlikely. However, social conflicts still exist and will most likely continue to exist – including conflicts between labour and capital. In 2005, on the French national holiday, the Polish employees of companies owned by France Telecom, threatened by lay-offs, held a

demonstration in front of the French embassy in Warsaw. They carried a sign: “Il nous reste encore une Bastille à prendre: France Telecom!”.

History has certainly not ended – although a repetition of the road from the French to the October Revolution within a hypothetical cyclical development is extremely unlikely.