

The Decline of the Left in the 20th Century

Towards a Theory of Historical Regression: 1917

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I am going to address the year 1917. I would like to start with 2 related quotations, one from Marx, from the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848:

“In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which *the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.*”

My second quotation is from Karl Korsch, from his 1922 Introduction to Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* of 1875:

“Hegel links the freedom of each to the freedom of all as something of equal value. But in doing so he regards the freedom of the individual only in terms of the freedom of the whole, through which it is realized. Marx, by contrast, makes the free development of each the precondition for the correlative freedom of all.”

1917 is the most enigmatic and hence controversial date in the history of the Left. It is therefore necessarily the focal point for the Platypus philosophy of history of the Left, which seeks to grasp problems in the present, as those that had already manifested in the past, but have not yet been overcome. Until we make historical sense of the problems associated with the

events and self-conscious actors of 1917, we will be haunted by their legacy. Therefore, whether we are aware of this or not, we are tasked with grappling with 1917.

1917 was the most profound attempt to change the world that has ever taken place.

The two most important names associated with the revolution that broke out in 1917 in Russia and in 1918 in Germany are the 2nd International Marxist radicals Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, each of whom played fateful roles in this revolutionary moment. Two Marxian critical theorists, who sought to follow Luxemburg and Lenin, to advance the historical consciousness and philosophical awareness of the problems of revolutionary politics, in the wake of 1917, are Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch.

While neither Lenin nor Luxemburg survived the revolutionary period that began in 1917, both Lukács and Korsch ended up disavowing and distancing themselves from their works, both published in 1923, that sought to elaborate a Marxian critical theory of the revolutionary proletarian socialist politics of Lenin and Luxemburg. While Lukács adapted his perspective to the prevailing conditions of Stalinism in the international Communist movement, Korsch became a critic of “Marxist-Leninist” Bolshevism, and an important theorist of Left- or “council communist” politics. Meanwhile, Luxemburg was pitted against Lenin in a similar degeneration and disintegration of the revolutionary consciousness that had informed the revolution of 1917.

The forms that this disintegration took involved the arraying of the principles of liberalism against those of socialism, or libertarianism against authoritarianism. Lenin and

Lukács became emblems of authoritarian socialism, while Luxemburg and Korsch became associated with more libertarian, if not liberal, concerns.

But what remains buried, under such a misapprehension of the disputed legacy of 1917, is the substance of agreement and collaboration, in the revolutionary Marxist politics of that moment, among all these figures. Behind the fact of Luxemburg's close collaboration and practical political unity with Lenin lies the intrinsic relationship of liberalism with socialism, and emancipation with necessity. Rather than associating, in such a one-sided manner, Lenin with revolutionary necessity, and Luxemburg with desirable emancipation, we need to grasp how necessity, possibility and desirability were related, for both Luxemburg and Lenin, in ways that not only allowed for, but actually motivated their shared, mutual thought and action, in the revolution that opened in 1917.

Both Lenin and Luxemburg sought to articulate and fulfill the concerns of liberalism with socialism — for instance in Lenin's (qualified) endorsement of self-determination against national oppression.

Lukács and Korsch were among the first — and remain the best — to have rigorously explored the theoretical implications of the shared politics of Luxemburg and Lenin, in their works *History and Class Consciousness* and “Marxism and Philosophy,” respectively. Both Lukács and Korsch approached what they considered the practical and theoretical breakthrough of the 3rd International Marxist communism of Luxemburg and Lenin, by a return to the

“Hegelian” roots of Marxism, a reconsideration of its “idealist” dimension — against a “materialist” objectivistic metaphysics that lied behind “economism,” for example.

This involved, for Lukács and Korsch, an exploration of Lenin and Luxemburg’s break from the objectivistic “vulgar Marxism” of the politics and theory of the 2nd International, exemplified by Karl Kautsky. Lukács’s term for such objectivism was “reification;” Korsch addressed it by way of Marx’s approach to the philosophical problem of “theory and practice,” which Korsch said had become “separated out” in the 2nd International period, their “umbilical cord broken,” while Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to bring them back into productive tension, and advance their relation through their revolutionary Marxism.

Ironically, while the title of Lukács’s work was *History and Class Consciousness*, it was concerned with a more “philosophical” exposition, and categorial investigation, of the problem of “reification,” and the commodity form as socially mediating, following Marx in *Capital*; while Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” actually addressed the historical vicissitudes of the theory-practice problem in Marx and Engels’s lifetime and in the subsequent history of the Marxism of the 2nd International. In both cases, there was an attempt to grasp the issue of subjectivity, or the “subjective” dimension of Marxism.

But it was this focus on subjectivity from which both Lukács and Korsch broke in their subsequent development: Lukács disavowing what he pejoratively called the attempt to “out-Hegel Hegel,” making his peace with Stalinist “dialectical materialism,” while (later) attempting to found a “Marxist ontology;” Korsch distancing himself from what he came to call,

pejoratively, the “metaphysical” presuppositions of Marxism, even and perhaps especially as practiced by Lenin — and, also, if to a lesser extent, by Luxemburg — and even by Marx himself, Korsch ultimately calling for “going beyond Marxism.”

In this complementary, if divergent, trajectory, Lukács and Korsch reflected, in their own ways, the return of the “vulgar Marxism” they had sought to supersede, in their theoretical digestion of 1917, a return marked by the Stalinization of the international Communist movement beginning in the 1920s. — For example, [Theodor W.] Adorno was excited to meet Lukács in Vienna in 1925, only to be repulsed at Lukács’s disavowal of the work that had so strongly inspired Adorno and his colleagues in Frankfurt School critical theory (such as [Walter] Benjamin and [Max] Horkheimer). Korsch, who had also, like Lukács, been associated with the Frankfurt School from its inception, came, by the end of the 1930s, to scorn the Frankfurt critical theorists as “Marxist metaphysicians,” while Lukács later (in the 1960s) wrote of them contemptuously, as having taken up residence at the “Grand Hotel Abyss,” explicitly deriding them for following his early work.

In such disavowals can be found evidence for the repression of the problems Lukács and Korsch had sought to address in elaborating Marxian theory from Lenin and Luxemburg’s revolutionary thought and action in 1917-19.

Likewise, in subsequent history, the relation between “means” and “ends” for the Marxist radicals Lenin and Luxemburg in the moment of 1917 became obscured, Lenin being caricatured as believing, in some Machiavelli-fashion, that the “ends justified the means,” or exemplifying

“revolutionary will;” while Luxemburg was equally caricatured, as an upholder of principled emancipatory means, in extolling the virtues of practical defeat, seemingly happy to remain a Cassandra of the revolution. Biographically, this is crudely reconciled in the image of Luxemburg’s quixotic martyrdom during the Spartacist uprising of 1919, and Lenin’s medical removal from political power at the end of his life, condemned to watch, helpless, the dawn of the Stalinist authoritarianism, to which his political ruthlessness and pursuit of revolutionary ends had supposedly led.

In either case, rather than a determined investigation of these revolutionary Marxists’ thought and action, at the level of the basis for their self-understanding and political judgment, models from which we might be able to learn, elaborate and build upon further, they have been regarded only as emblems of competing principles, in the abstract (e.g., on the question of the Constituent Assembly, over which they had differed only tactically, not principally). So Lenin’s writings and actions are scoured for any hint of authoritarian inhumanity, and Luxemburg’s for anything that can be framed for its supposedly more humane compassion. At the same time, the futility of both their politics has been naturalized: it is tacitly understood that neither what Lenin nor Luxemburg aspired to achieve was actually possible to accomplish — either in their time or in ours.

In the words of Adorno’s writing on the legacy of Lenin, Luxemburg, Korsch and Lukács, in his last completed book *Negative Dialectics* (from 1966), this way of approaching 1917 and its significance evinced “dogmatization and thought-taboos.” The thought and action of Lenin and Luxemburg are approached dogmatically, and they and their critical-theoretical

inheritors, Lukács, Korsch, Benjamin and Adorno, are approached only with a powerful thought-taboo firmly in place: that the revolutionary moment of 1917 was doomed to failure, and that its fate was tragically played out in the character of the revolutionary Marxism of its time. That Marxism is thus buried, in an attempt to ward off the haunting accusation, that it did not fail us, but rather that we have failed it — failed to learn what we might from it. But, like Lukács and Korsch in their subsequent development, after they convinced themselves of the “errors of their ways,” we have not recognized and understood, but only rationalized, the problematic legacy of 1917.

1917 remains a question — and it is the very same question that Lenin and Luxemburg went about trying address in theory and practice — whether we ask it explicitly of ourselves now or not. It is the great tabooed subject, even if that taboo has been enforced, either by a mountain of calumny heaped upon it, or the “praise” it earns in Stalinist — or “Trotskyist” — “adherence.”

For example, it remains unclear whether the “soviets” or “workers’ councils” that sprung up in the revolutions of 1917-19 could have ever been proven in practice to be an adequate social-political means (for beginning) to overcome capitalism. The Lukács of the revolutionary period recognized [in “The Standpoint of the Proletariat,” the third part of his essay on “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” 1923] the danger that

“[As Hegel said,] directly before the emergence of something qualitatively new, the old state of affairs gathers itself up into its original, purely general, essence, into its simple totality, transcending and absorbing back into itself all those marked differences and peculiarities which it evinced when it was still viable. . . .

[I]n the age of the dissolution of capitalism, the fetishistic categories collapse and it becomes necessary to have recourse to the ‘natural form’ underlying them.”

Lukács recognized that the “producers’ democracy” of the “workers’ councils” in the revolutionary “dictatorship of the proletariat” was intrinsically related to, and indeed the political expression of, an intensification of the “reification” of the commodity form. Nevertheless, it seems that the attempt, by Lenin and Trotsky’s Bolsheviks, to bring “all power to the soviets” in the October Revolution of 1917, and by Luxemburg’s Spartacists in the German Revolution that followed, is something we can learn from, despite its failure. For this revolutionary moment raises all the questions, and at the most profound levels, of the problematic relationship between capitalism and democracy that still haunt us today.

Similarly, Korsch recognized that the revolutions of 1917-19 were the outcome of a “crisis of Marxism” that had previously manifested in the 2nd International, in the reformist “revisionist” dispute, in which the younger generation of radicals, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky first cut their teeth, at the turn of the century. But, according to Korsch in 1923, this “crisis of Marxism” remained unresolved. 1917 can thus be said to be the highest expression of the “crisis of Marxism,” that Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, and Korsch and Lukács after them, recognized as manifesting the highest expression of the *crisis of capitalism*, in the period of war, revolution, counterrevolution, civil war and reaction that set the stage for subsequent 20th Century history. Arguably, the world never really overcame or even recovered from this crisis of the early 20th Century, but has only continued to struggle with its still-unresolved aftermath.

In this sense, 1917 was not, in the self-understanding of its thinkers and actors, an attempt to leap from the realm of necessity, but rather the attempt to advance a necessity, the necessity of social revolution and transformation, to a higher stage, and thus open a new realm of possibility.

The enigmatic silence surrounding the question of 1917 is masked by a deafening din of opprobrium meant to prevent our hearing it. It remains, as Benjamin put it, an “alarm clock that rings continuously,” whether we (choose to) hear it or not.

But, the degree to which those who have come later have done so, the repression of 1917 has been achieved only at the cost of a regression that, as Benjamin put it, does not cease to consume the past and our ability to learn from it, ceding the meaning of history and its sacrifices to our enemies, and rendering those sacrifices in past struggles vain.

Recognizing the nature of the difficulty of 1917, that the problems we find in this moment comprise the essence of its potential pertinence for us, may be the first step in our recognizing the character of the regression the Left has undergone since then. Like a troubling memory in an individual’s life that impinges upon consciousness, the memory of 1917 that troubles our conceptions of social-political possibilities in the present might help us reveal the problems we seek to overcome, the same problems against which Lenin and Luxemburg struggled — even if in failure, a brilliant failure from which we cannot afford to be disinherited.