

# Beyond Post-Socialism

## Dialogues with the Far Left

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# Introduction

Some time back, over a decade ago now, two closely placed encounters had me reflecting on the contemporary situation of communism, both of them on the terrain of that horribly ‘lost cause’, Palestine–Israel. The first occurred during a meeting at which the Australasian representative of the Palestine Authority spoke. At the conclusion of his talk, a communist from a small Trotskyist group stood up and demanded that the Palestinian Authority immediately ‘unleash the awesome power of the working class’ on the Israeli settler state. The only thought that came to my mind in response to this demand was a *Simpsons* episode in which executives from a company manufacturing energy bars sloganize that their product ‘unleashes the awesome power of apples’. Here, communism, socialism, Marxism would seem hopelessly out-of-time, exhausted and embarrassing, tediously and meaninglessly clichéd, a dead family of languages unable to speak to the present, let alone about the future.

The second encounter reverses or troubles this assessment, though. Around the same time, I was reading the chaotically humorous novel *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, by the Palestinian communist Emile Habiby. Here, in spite of the four decades that have passed since its original publication, communism and Marxism remain powerful and present as analytical tools and as the imagination of other, better worlds, full, that is, of utopian significance, which Levitas (2013: 12) describes as ‘a secular form of grace’, encompassing loss, longing, redemption, fulfilment.<sup>1</sup> Communism, as represented by Habiby, can feel like *the* heroic, egalitarian, solidaristic and universalistic orientation, still, to the unyielding difficulties of our times. In one of the many lovely passages of the book, the anti-hero Saeed (whose stupidity and

cowardice see him recruited by Israeli intelligence) is trying to convince a woman he loves, Baqiyya, against involvement with the communists:

Baqiyya opened her eyes wide and rained questions down on me.

'Who are the Communists?'

'Ungrateful people who deny the blessings.'

'What blessings?'

'The blessings of life which victors bestow upon the conquered.'

'But such blessings come from God.'

'Well, they deny God. They're heretics.'

'How are they heretics?'

'They claim, God preserve us from them, that they can change pre-determined fate'...

'Then we must seek help from the Communists.' (Habiby, 2003: 91)

Today, I think, many on the Left feel very much strung and pulled between these two poles, a sense of the urgency of the communist demand and a sense that, sadly, it might belong to a lost world. Above all, in this book, I want to lean in the more optimistic direction, exploring the question of what sort of help we are likely to get from the communists today. And, a decade on from the encounters I have just recalled, I think this question seems a much more reasonable one. A lot has happened since what we might variously name as the post-Marxist, end-of-history, triumphal liberal, happy globalist moments, between, let us say, 1977 and the middle of the 1990s,<sup>2</sup> where Marxism, socialism, communism were somewhat successfully consigned to the dustbin of history. For a start, I think we're now more likely to be attentive to just how much of the socialist past is still with us in the present – whether we are thinking about welfare states, widespread denunciation of sexism and racism, the continuing power and success of union mobilizations or the egalitarianism, irreverence and scepticism that inhabit popular culture and contest thinking animated only by questions of growth, profit and competition (Therborn, 2011). More than this, since the middle of the 1990s, with the emergence of the anti-globalization movement, and after a slow puncturing process of neo-liberal assumptions through that decade (Callinicos, 2003), there is perhaps a growing sense that we are in a moment of the re-opening or re-birth of history, as Alain Badiou (2012b) has titled his recent book – looking to the reawakening of interest in and creative debate around Marx, the still rolling, ominous financial crisis from 2008, the Occupy movement and the emergence of a harder parliamentary Left (for instance, in Greece), the Arab Spring

and more. And we have some evidence, too, of this re-opening in the remarkable attention given to contemporary communist thinkers like Badiou himself, Slavoj Žižek, Hardt and Negri, in the proliferation of books and conferences effectively dedicated to thinking the possible shapes of twenty-first century socialism, and in Chibber's (2013: 294) compelling observation that 'For the first time since the 1980s, *everyone* is talking about capitalism'.

In this introduction, I want to provide a brief backdrop to the chapters that follow, beginning with a consideration of the broad shape of anti-communism today. Following this, and again in coarse strokes, I want to do something similar in mapping the ground and tone of contemporary socialist/communist discussion. Finally, I want to turn to reflect on a historical intellectual-political formation I have called Left communism. My interest in and continuing but critical fidelity to this Left communism informs the chapters ahead, where I seek to stage a series of conversations with contemporary socialist thinkers and traditions, with this Left communism and with what Santos (2006) has called an emerging Global Left, which appears to be moving beyond the older doctrinal and strategic disagreements and divides of an older Left. Convinced that we are, once more, at a point at which that Gramscian maxim 'the old is dying and the new cannot be born' (Gramsci, 1998: 276) holds, I want to approach the question of contemporary structures of knowledge, particularly around a constellation of communists who today offer us their assistance.

## The communist society and its enemies

In mentioning Gramsci, I am suggesting, as do many, many others, that the concerns of the *Prison Notebooks* are really still pivotal for those on the Left – the organization of social groups, the links between knowledge, feelings and collectivities, leadership, the battleground for consent, popular culture as problem, ideology (Brennan, 2006; Morton, 2007; Santucci, 2010; Showstack-Sassoon, 2000; Thomas, 2011). It is particularly in thinking all at once about how capitalism is transforming, how groups are being organized and how those involved in the production and distribution of knowledge enter into these battles that Gramsci remains so alive today; as well, I think, in that he confronted an early, vigorous post-Marxism (Brennan, 2006), and he faced with supple intelligence the rise of fascism – just as, today, we witness the prominence of post-foundational thought in the human sciences, we see growing post-democratic tendencies, a hardening and thickening populist Right

and a collection of closely connected, forceful religious reawakenings.<sup>3</sup> Gramsci's reflections on the organic function of intellectuals are central to my concerns in this section: what are the patterns of anti-communist intellectuality today? How are we to divide and explain the different strands that, at the least, come together over the non-contemporaneity of communism, who still posit communism as dominant dystopian figure? I want to approach this, in the spirit of Gramsci – though not according to the concrete philological letter – by way of ideal-typical idea clusters, which are, at once, diagnostic-explanatory, political-strategic and utopian-evaluative sets of references.

A first cluster we might name the 'cosmopolitical' – the world becoming one, often despite acknowledged disjunctures and threats. This position, connected to globalization discourse, announces our post-communist present as promising growing wealth, mutual understanding, expanding freedoms, and governing mechanisms (often technical and problem-solving rather than strictly democratic) more and more responsive to the choices and preferences of a global citizenry. The basic political variety of this set of commitments is liberal – the rule of law, the protection of life, liberty and property, tolerance and non-violence. Coming in various shades across a continuum that stretches from vague social democracy to sanguine neo-liberalism, and with various qualifications about, say, the continuing appeal of nationalism or the threat of global terror, this mode of intellectuality corresponds roughly to a real or imagined freedom from place, an elite subject at home everywhere (Friedman, 1995). In the narrative variations of this position, the really existing collapse of communism is, simultaneously, the moment of arrival for realistic hopes for world peace, the reign of global human rights, universal democracy, multi-cultural interchange, and the flattening of intra- and inter-societal wealth, power and status disparities.

A second cluster of thought elements presents us with an apparently opposing pole of diagnosis, strategic meditation and 'utopian reference' (Alexander, 1995; 2001). Here, the global is an illusion, or it mostly presents a multitude of threats, and a more realistic scale of social organization is instead sought. At its most ambitious, the proposed rescaling is civilizational; at its most modest, it is indigenously-ethnic or local; and it also comes in re-assertive cultural nationalist and traditionalizing-religious versions, which suggest the possibility of a re-encharmed life-world. What we have, here, are a series of appeals to a future – rooted and social – way of being, a response to atomization, dislocation and uncertain futures, organized around a variety of foes,

often trading on significations that were once the property of social democracy, communism and national liberation movements, and visible among uneasy elites who elevate the particular (ethnic, national, local, confessional, civilizational) over the general. Communism, here, is read and rejected as rootless and abstractly universal, a project carried by intellectuals mobilized only by an Idea lacking in place, subjects and magic.

A final portrait of communists and socialism is often painted by, or implicit in, a third predominating thought cluster found among contemporary intellectuals – which we could, again after Friedman (1995), describe as a narcissistic-individualizing pole. Sometimes resonant with cosmopolitan or collectivist-traditionalizing impulses, this modality pivots around notions of the art of the good life, and individual self-construction and reconstruction. Found in libertarian and counter- and sub-cultural modalities (say, cyber-libertarianism or deep-Green activism), its black beast is, very often, statism, collectivism, or egalitarianism, with communism attached to any or all of these and implicated, therefore, in the crushing of difference, coercive uniformity and normalization, understood as a rageful and inevitably totalitarian project of levelling – in short, a moral disaster for the modern individual.

This is obviously highly schematic and far from exhaustive, but these structures of knowledge, these intellectual patternings, I think, co-exist and compete with the communist passions I am exploring in the chapters ahead, providing another set of appeals – once again, explanatory, political and utopian – on a terrain marked by all sorts of morbid symptoms, which provoke urgent efforts at answers: for instance – a more unstable, multi-polar situation in terms of geo-political power; financial crisis, economic concentration, severe austerity threats and growing inequalities; turbulent popular protests, including those from a Right-wing populist and religious direction, and in the face of post-democratic tendencies in the formal political sphere, including certain elements of a new authoritarianism; a popular cultural field marked by irony, consumption and irreverence.

### **Left reflections on the twenty-first century**

I will elaborate on some of these issues in the chapters to come but, here, I want to turn my attention to the broad ideal-typical intellectual patterns that are visible on the Left of the political spectrum, which attempt to size up the contemporary terrain and to reflect upon Left

results and prospects in the twenty-first century. Here, we could follow the compelling typology of critical intellectuals put forward recently by Razmig Keucheyan. This materialist analysis foregrounds changes in the intellectual field, especially in the academic field, the ‘fate of the organizations to which they [the critical theorists surveyed] belonged’ (Keucheyan, 2013: 51), the connections between early doctrinal orientation and later trajectory, and delineates six ideal-typical positions. The first ideal-type contains the ‘converts’ – for example, Irving Kristol, Andre Glucksmann, Lucio Colletti, Julia Kristeva – Keucheyan insisting on distinguishing the serious, thoughtful liberal conversion of Lefort from the ‘fast motion’ (2013: 54) case of the *Tel Quel* collective. The ‘pessimists’, combining radicality with resignation about substantial emancipatory change, meanwhile, typically end up in a ‘form of “dandyism” or “decadentism”’ (2013: 57) – for instance, Guy Debord after the death of the Situationist International. The third group, the ‘resisters’, often belonged to currents relatively ‘unaffected by the collapse of real socialism’ (2013: 61) – some anarchists (Chomsky or Daniel Colson) and Trotskyists, say. The ‘innovators’, engaging in hybridization of theory and turning to new theoretical objects (ecology, law, media, for instance), include thinkers such as Slavoj Žižek, Ernesto Laclau, Judith Butler, Hardt and Negri. Next, we have the ‘experts’ who often hail from ‘disciplines of a highly empirical cast’ to ‘contradict the dominant discourse’ (2013: 66) – Vandana Shiva, members of ATTAC’s scientific committee, for example. And, finally, the ‘leaders’ are those rare thinkers who combine theorizing with active politics – Daniel Bensaid, Alex Callinicos, Alvaro Garcia Linera and Edward Said are examples here.

Keucheyan’s analysis is excellent but, again, I will suggest a broader typology, avoiding the complicated and multiple positions of individual thinkers, some of whom I will engage with in the chapters to come, thinking about three major constellations of intellectuality across Left reflections today: first, a cool communism of the watchtower, an overwhelmingly pessimistic diagnostic modality; second, a thoughtful, rather Catholic and often more up-beat consideration of the conjuncture; and, third, an obdurate, sometimes, ecstatic militancy of Left renewal and socialistic possibility.

The first of these modalities I have described as a cool socialism of the watchtower, a sense that the co-ordinates within which an older Left had been formed and located are now significantly dissipated, that the contemporary field of possible socialist endeavour is unrecognizable, against that of yesterday. Defeat is the reality the Left must today face, confronting with sobriety and stoicism the necessarily long hard



task of intellectual and political re-tooling, and re-imagining a twenty-first century socialism amidst the detritus and disorganization left by the decades'-long victory of capital. A second broad variation of Left response will typically register the scale of transformation and necessary Left re-thinking, but remains more light-hearted, discovering an array of promising ambiguities and encouraging signs on the street, as well as registering continuing Left resolve. Often welcoming of current pluralism, this interlocutory approach acknowledges the historic Left's limits and is attentive to opportunities for re-building, often considering some severe renunciations of time-honoured facets of the Marxian and wider socialist traditions. A third broad cluster of Left response contains militant variations of imaginative renewal and defiance. Assertive, combative and unrepentant, this strand often creatively re-occupies older Marxian outposts or seeks to inhabit new ones, detecting the current moment as both threatening and ripe – a forced and forbidding opportunity – for socialist re-emergence.

## Returning to Left communism

Despite the differences in tone, each of these modalities of Left reflection have undoubtedly been buoyed by a general sense that something like a new Global Left has been in emergence since the close of the 1990s. Embarrassingly, when I was working first on a doctoral dissertation, then on a book on Left communism, between 1996 and 2002, I utterly missed the significance of what was taking place in Seattle and afterwards and, especially, of the affinities between what I was imagining was urgently alive in that Left communist tradition and what was happening on the ground of alternative globalization. My hope was that more attention be paid to this vigorous, neglected, defeated and variegated current of communism, after the collapse of 'really existing socialism' and the capitulation to neo-liberalism of Western social democracy (el-Ojeili, 2003).

This Left communist current contains a wealth of sometimes contradictory emphases – a group of thinkers whose ranks include anarcho-communists and anarcho-syndicalists, council communists and Bordigists, situationists and impossibilists.<sup>4</sup> To indicate the variety and complexity, here, I would refer the reader to Chris Wright's (2005) worthy but inescapably rather tortured and partial<sup>5</sup> effort to represent the Marxist side of this family tree. In his 'Libertarian Marxist Tendency Map', Wright begins with Marx and Engels, followed by major branches to council communism, Rosa Luxemburg, and Lenin and post-Leninist Leninism,

which are then followed by a tangle of subsequent branches and their multiple interconnections – for instance, the Frankfurt School, the Johnson-Forest Tendency, Bordigist groups, Operaismo, the Situationist International, Open Marxism and so on. Adding in the numerous anarchist sub-currents<sup>6</sup> – such as anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism, individualist anarchism, eco-anarchism, communalist anarchism, post-anarchism, anarcho-feminism – their internal variations, and some representative groups and thinkers, we would make such a map infinitely more illegible.

In some ways, it is perhaps fair to say that if Left communism is an intellectual-political formation, it is so, first and foremost, negatively – as opposed to other socialist traditions. I have labelled this negative pole ‘socialist orthodoxy’, composed of both Leninists and social democrats. Of course, this is a grand simplification, and I would now be much more hesitant about any hard and fast separations, but this distinction still serves some purpose as a starting point for a consideration of the commonalities across Left communism, the unity amidst great difference. What I suggested was that these Left communist thinkers differentiated their own understandings of communism from a strand of socialism that came to follow a largely electoral road in the West, pursuing a kind of social capitalism, and a path to socialism that predominated in the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, which sought revolutionary conquest of power and led to something like state capitalism. Generally, the Left communist thinkers were to find these paths locked within the horizons of capitalism (the law of value, money, private property, class, the state), and they were to characterize these solutions as statist, substitutionist and authoritarian. I will now seek to get closer by exploring some significant themes in this Left communist work – party and organization, knowledge and science, state, economy, democracy and state capitalism.

A first crucial theme is the debate around party and organization. Here, Left communists frequently distinguished themselves from Lenin’s substitutionist strictures in *What Is To Be Done?*, often following Rosa Luxemburg’s early insistence on the leading role of working-class self-organization, and her fears about where Lenin’s contentions might lead. Therefore, it is frequently to forms of working-class or popular self-organization that Left communists look in answer to the questions of the struggle for socialism, revolution and post-capitalist social organization. Nevertheless, Left communists have often continued to organize themselves into party-like structures that undertake agitation, propaganda, education and other forms of political intervention. This

is a vexed issue across Left communism and has resulted in a number of significant variations – from the absolute rejection of separate parties in favour of mere study or affinity groups, to the critique of the naivety of pure spontaneism and an insistence on the necessary, though often modest, role of disciplined, self-critical and popularly connected communist organizations.

We find similar dissensus around the problem of the origin and importance of socialist consciousness. Does it derive, above all, from material conditions, which might imply nothing more than ‘revolutionary waiting’ from the communist intellectual, or is it to be created through education and/or the formation of a communist counter-culture within the shell of the old society? Some of these debates have a more contemporary ring to them, in a time when we often hear that we are now in a period of politics without parties or that vanguardism has been eclipsed after the end of ‘really existing socialism’, that new forms of rhizomatic, networked or horizontal organization are supplanting the older arborescent, pyramidal and vertical structures. And a re-invigorated and sophisticated return to Lenin today, which insists that minorities do count, that fidelity and discipline are not the equivalent of totalitarianism, and that organization is the permanent basis of any genuine politics, has made such questions even more difficult.

Tightly bound up with such questions around organization and the role of communist intellectuals is the problem of knowledge, power and communism, one significant part of which entails reflecting on the role and character of theory in social contestation and change. Here, again, Left communists sought to take a number of paths away from a socialist orthodoxy that often emphasized the completeness of Marxism, Necessity, science and prioritized communist intellectuals over the mass of people. For some, this orthodoxy was just not orthodox enough (Lenin and Kautsky as apostates), and a super-Marxian intransigence in theoretical matters was the order of the day. Another route has been an anarchistic hostility to Marxism as, in essence, a theory of the power of a new class, sometimes set against a wholly other set of emphases – will, morality, instinct; sometimes issuing in an Enlightenment, rationalist educationism, devoid of the more elaborate theoretical preferences of the Marxists.

Of course, in the Western Marxist current, the return to Hegel provided a further escape route from the discredit into which ‘real communism’ was falling – for Karl Korsch, for instance – while council communist Anton Pannekoek looked to Joseph Dietzgen, and others responded by breaking from an erstwhile theoretical paradigm

(Cornelius Castoriadis's break from Marxism, for example); and various Left communists turned their attention to a whole plethora of issues of culture, widely understood – everyday life, art, sexuality, ideology, media, consumption – as a guide to the maintenance of social order, the failure of revolutionary aspirations and as a well-spring from which truly emancipatory contestation and transformation might emerge.

A final set of problems concerns the state, democracy and the projected organization of post-capitalist life. Again the negative contrast with Marxist orthodoxy is decisive. Both the social democrats and the Leninists are often charged with positing a statist conception of socialism, equating nationalization with socialization of the means of production, and dependent on a socialism understood as the equivalence of party and state. As mentioned, the Russian Revolution is frequently associated with capitalism/state capitalism rather than communism – a social order still marked by class division, exploitation and domination, private property, and the law of value. Meanwhile, social democracy is viewed, very often, as establishing merely a social capitalism – the mixed economy, the welfare state and class compromise in the interests of national integrity and progress.

The alternative to such orthodox conceptions of socialism, as noted, has very often been centred on appeals to working-class or popular forms of self-organization, as the means to struggle against capitalism and as the foundation of post-capitalist organization – workers' councils, revolutionary unions, federated communes of locality – seen, frequently, as embodying direct democracy and a critique in action of alienated notions of representation.

## Looking ahead

Because of my sense of the continuing relevance and richness of this tradition, because this is the tradition I have been formed in, intellectually and politically, the dialogues ahead are, for the most part, informed by and centred on Left communism. As I have said, I am now much more sceptical about the idea that we can think this formation as absolutely distinct from 'socialist orthodoxy'. I see that orthodoxy as vastly richer, more complicated and fertile than I once did, and I would tend, instead, to see communism or socialism as a large, variegated field of thought and action, from which we can draw somewhat pragmatically from the strengths of a whole range of very different thinkers, organizations and sub-traditions. At the same time, it is clear to me that the emerging Global Left is perhaps marked,

above all, by crucial affinities with the currents and emphases of Left communism, and that this formation demands an acknowledged, explicit presence in any discussion of the Left, Marxism, communism and socialism today.

Above all, this Left communism provides us with still powerful ways of responding to the broken promises of neo-liberal capitalism today, as a robust critique and a compelling set of utopian proposals. First, the notion of neo-liberalism's broken promises, which is the suggestion that 'reality problems' (Alexander, 1995) have significantly eroded the 'narrative strength' (Dawson, 2013: 7) of neo-liberalism as an explanatory and utopian thought complex. Here, we might say that neo-liberalism proffers that the freeing of markets, the reduction of state interventions to a minimal level, and the ethos of competitive, self-reliant individualism will result in liberty, meritocracy, harmonious interchange, and knowledge, transparency and rationality.

I think it is increasingly clear that these promises have failed to be fulfilled. In the place of freedom, is it not plausible to argue that we see the disembedding of economic concerns from more widely social concerns, growing liberty for the already wealthy and powerful, along with the profound unfreedoms ('dis-emancipation' [Tosel, 2008]) generated by market anarchy, flexibilization, the erosion of welfare and other rights, and the unleashing of a culture of atomized consumerism that is quite at odds with freedom understood in the more robust sense of autonomy? Instead of meritocracy, might we not characterize the present as a time of growing inequality that, moreover, undermines liberty in manifold ways, and one of more and more precarious working and living conditions for the vast majority? Rather than harmonious interchange, we appear to have escalating violence, cultural polarization and a new state authoritarianism (including new forms of imperialism), with states serving ever more narrowly economic agendas connected to profitability, growth and competition. And in place of the promised arrival of a knowledge age, is it instead not more accurate to underscore the pervasiveness of a conformist culture industry centred on consumption and excess, the return behind Enlightenment to various forms of compensatory obscurantisms, and the disfiguration of science by its deepening attachments to money and power.<sup>7</sup>

More positively, moving from the resources of critique to the utopian dimension, Left communism, I believe, offers us a compelling alternative portrait of the good socialist life, of human flourishing and its pivotal principles and institutional conditions.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, these

utopian elements are not merely disembodied ideas but they can be viewed as already operative within social movements, organizations, popular culture and everyday life. As a start, Left communists challenge common-sense views around the economy, that economic questions begin and end with emphases on growth, profit and competition. In a related vein, notions of value, worth and usefulness are detached from narrowly monetary conceptualizations and instead are deeply embedded in a vantage point that considers social life as a whole. In a similar manner, the separation of work and life is questioned, and alternatives suggested that are underpinned by notions of dignity, self-realization, and freedom from domination and exploitation. Here, a freedom that is not restrictively negative (as in neo-liberal conceptions) but is, as well, positive – connected, that is, to views about human flourishing – is important, a profoundly embedded understanding of freedom, which ties freedom to its social, communal conditions and, importantly, refuses to separate questions of freedom from those of equality (Dawson, 2013; Schechter, 2007).

Moving to the closely connected political realm, Left communism asks searching questions about the democratic nature of liberal democracy, often in light of an orientation that understands true democracy as autonomy or popular domination extended to all facets of our lives together, rather than to a restricted, narrow, separate ‘political’ stage. Sometimes, Left communists are less than enthusiastic about democracy, contending that democracy’s fetishism of the majority and individualist premises should be replaced by arrangements expressive of something like our ‘communal being’. They imagine, here, a range of possibilities for life beyond the state – councils, communes, plural popular associations – and a vision of another way of doing politics.

As I say, these values and institutional suggestions should be seen as extant, as operative in a range of ways and places, wherever critique (explicit or implicit) of neo-liberal values and practices and suggested or existing alternatives appear. Briefly, we can, for instance, detect such values within the field of alternative globalization: in the opposition to growth as the goal of social organization, in the name of sustainability and social justice; in critiques of privatization and commodification (‘the world is not for sale’); in the insistence that limitations be placed upon markets (financial regulation, for example); in contestations of state authoritarianism, surveillance and militarism; within protests directed at monopolistic corporations unresponsive to wider social or ecological values; and in indignation at the excessive wealth and power of ‘the one per cent’ – to name just a few instantiations.

This Left communist tradition, as mentioned, is present, as analytical object or interlocutor, across the following chapters, where I critically discuss an array of Left thinkers, traditions and debates around socialism. Of course, given the expansiveness and diversity of this tradition, I cannot be exhaustive here, surveying certain traditions and thinkers rather than others, traditions and thinkers I take to be most illuminating, provocative, or illustrative of certain socialist strengths or dilemmas. I begin with a critical overview of 'post-Marxism' as an intellectual formation characterized by a series of challenges to Marxism and socialism, or a rubbing together of broadly Marxian concerns and post-foundational thinking. My scepticism about the theoretical, political and utopian gains of post-Marxism— a chronically residual socialism, submission to the post-modernist fixation on limits, despite the important attempt at a non-theological attachment to Marxism – runs through other chapters. In Chapter 2 for instance, I turn to the arguments of Claude Lefort, Cornelius Castoriadis and what we might call recent 'psychoanalytical Leninism'. Castoriadis, to my mind, is the most important contemporary representative of the direct democracy contentions of council communism, rethinking socialism by way of the notion of autonomy, which, importantly, encompasses both an individual and a collective dimension. Nevertheless, Castoriadis's and Lefort's post-Marxism often appears to limit both sociological analysis and the utopian dimension of their work, just as psychoanalytic Leninism remains imprisoned within some of the more damaging confines of a barely reconstructed Leninism.

A one-time member of Castoriadis's Socialism or Barbarism group, Guy Debord and his organization, the Situationist International (SI), are the subject matter of Chapter 3. While elements of Debord and the SI – diversion, the notion of spectacle, the attention to contemporary urbanism, as well as another passionate, more contemporary version of council communism – have travelled well into the present, the current attraction to this thinker and to the SI has tended to conceal a number of reasons that should, I think, provoke us to try to forget Debord. Especially troublesome, in this regard, is that the slavish admiration of the SI's cultural politics has tended to obscure Debord's intolerable dogmatism and vituperative and ultimately arid sectarianism. Italian workerism is the focus of Chapter 4, a current contemporaneous with the SI and, like them, best placed within the Left communist tradition. This chapter explores some of the great strengths (the creative optimism of the intellect, particularly around approaching changing patterns of subaltern resistance as the driving engine of the social world) and antinomies (an enthusiasm for

overstatement that undermines sober strategic reflection) of this tradition, a tradition that finds contemporary expression in the tremendously influential work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to anarchism – the first exploring the work of primitivist communist Jacques Camatte and his unique trajectory, emerging from the much neglected Left communism of Italian Bordigism, then breaking from Marxism to push a communal-being-centred critique of modernity, of what he calls ‘the wandering of humanity’. This primitivism, while often somewhat eccentric, has the merit of tracing a singular path of ecologically informed Left communism, and combining this with an existentialist reflection on ‘living otherwise’ and a ‘community communism’ that seem due a present-day comeback of some kind. Chapter 6 focuses on the return of anarchism that many have detected within anti-globalization currents, critically exploring the claims of a growing literature that – on the streets, within contemporary contestatory movements and in the world of ideas – anarchism is making a return, as something like the ‘spirit of contemporary anti-capitalism’. Anarchism’s clear strengths seem to lie in its appeal to individual freedom, its anti-statism and its open and experimental qualities, while, at worst, this can issue in a politically obscure paean to liberty at the expense of equality, an individualism that is socially threadbare, and a hostility to analysis that is intellectually and strategically disarming.

Chapter 7 is an extended insistence on the continued relevance of the tireless work of Immanuel Wallerstein and world-systems thinking. Wallerstein’s politics again belong somewhere within the field of Left communism and his world-systems analysis joins to this the earliest and still most ambitious attempt to map, at a global level, the fields of economy, politics and culture, utterly out of step with post-modern and globalization thought but still, in my estimation, defensible and, in fact, indispensable for thinking our times. Finally, in Chapter 8, I examine four recent narrations of socialism’s life and times – important works by Alain Badiou, Peter Beilharz, Lucio Magri and Goran Therborn. These eminent, articulate voices issue from positions outside of that Left communist tradition, from Leninism and social democracy, but provide us with a wealth of forceful and timely questions and theses with respect to the past, present and future prospects of socialism, especially when brought into conversation with Left communist contentions. My inclusion of these voices is partly a move against a Left communist sectarianism, which would consign Leninism and social democracy ineradicably to the past, a Left sectarianism that would then be bereft of the vast riches of ideas still offered by those thinking out of these traditions.



It is clear to me that Badiou (2010b) is right at least in designating ours a time of experimentation, and creative and critical exploration towards a new Left, and this necessary encompassing and open exploration accounts for the shape these dialogues have taken. Above all, Castoriadis's (1997a: 417) contention – 'It is not just what is, but what could be and should be, that has need of us' – still seems to me the point, and this point is still unthinkable without the wealth (intellectual, political, utopian) bequeathed to us by socialism. And, within this socialism, we can't, of course, tell which of the seeds of time will grow, but my hunch is that significant strands of what will be important in social movements, cultural contestation, and intellectual debate from the Left, in the next decade or two, will intersect with the debates and discussants addressed here, and that the Left communists I deal with, or draw from in addressing others, will and should engage us as still live and worthy interlocutors into the future.

# 1

## Post-Marxist Trajectories: Diagnosis, Criticism, Utopia

### Introduction

For over a century, Marxism and socialism have been intimately joined. Therefore, the idea of 'post-Marxism' is a vital one for any contemporary re-thinking of emancipation. But post-Marxism is a troublesome notion. Might it not be a pretentious codeword for ex- or non-Marxism (Geras, 1987; 1988), merely another moment in 'the weak thought' of 'the end of Modernity' (Said, 1994: 399), 'a dull and meaningless term ... [that] makes sense only in an autobiographical context' (Heller and Feher, 1991: 4)? Such scepticism and irritation were to the fore in an earlier phase of 'furious' post-modernism and anti-post-modernism (Beilharz, 1994), where Marxist critics were likely to read post-Marxism as a signal of the 'advanced stage of an intellectual malady' (Geras, 1987: 43), of a European Left moving rightwards or becoming ever more spectatorial, culturalist and theoreticist.<sup>1</sup>

Even after a more appreciative, or at least cautious, next wave of commentary,<sup>2</sup> it can't be said that the term is entirely clear, that it is attached to an instantly recognizable canon of works, an obvious set of theoretical and political co-ordinates, or uncontroversially identifiable adepts. One solution, here, would be to limit the label to self-identified post-Marxists (Howarth, 1998) – most prominently Laclau and Mouffe and their followers. Yet, this seems insufficient, given an obvious confluence of concerns and emphases that bring Laclau and Mouffe's work close to a number of other thinkers. In this respect, the collection of intellectuals surveyed in three more recent works – Stuart Sim's (1998; 2000) *Post-Marxism: A Reader* and *Post-Marxism: An Intellectual History*, and Simon Tormey and Jules Townshend's (2006) *Key Thinkers from Critical Theory to Post-Marxism* – looks about right: Laclau and Mouffe, Lyotard,

Deleuze and Guattari, Derrida, Bauman, Habermas, Castoriadis, Heller and Hartmann, for instance. However, when we consider the diversity here, when such lists are expanded to include the full range of plausibly post-Marxist figures – such as Jameson, Harvey, Žižek, Badiou, Rancière, Baudrillard, Offe, Castells, Balibar, Honneth and Gorz – the difficulties involved in thinking of post-Marxism as anything like a coherent intellectual formation are clear.

In his earlier work, Stuart Sim (1998: 2) summarized post-Marxism as ‘a series of hostile and/or revisionary responses to classical Marxism from the post-structuralist/post-modernist/feminist direction, by figures who at one time in their lives would have considered themselves as Marxists, or whose thought processes had been significantly shaped by the classical Marxist tradition’. Here, Sim’s (1998: 7–8) solution to the problem of post-Marxism’s variety was to distinguish *post*-Marxism from *post-Marxism*, arguing, though, that both shared an ‘element of nostalgia’ and that, for both, ‘the post- side ... drives the theoretical enterprise’. More interested in *post-Marxism*, Sim’s introductory remarks are, on the whole, deflationary<sup>3</sup> – post-Marxism, most importantly, as an emotional rather than substantive matter: ‘What remains in post-Marxism is not so much Marxism, I would contend, as a series of somewhat empty gestures whose content is emotional rather than theoretical’ (Sim, 1998: 7). This emotion is, first and foremost, a nostalgia that marks an implicit or explicit recognition of defeat – the spectre of the totalitarianism, the deadness of socialist language today – alongside a reluctance to properly let go; and, in the end, Sim insists on the impossibility of any *real* conversation between an inherently monistic paradigm (Marxism) and an inherently pluralizing one (post-modernism).

Perhaps Sim is on to something, here, but there is more to post-Marxism, I think, than defeat and impasse, and there must be a coherence that runs beyond simple nostalgia. In this chapter, I want to think about this ‘something more’, to try and plot the ‘co-ordinates of unity’ (Anderson, 1976) of post-Marxism as a ‘series of gestures’ (Said, 2001: 160) that respond to ‘reality problems’ (Alexander, 1995) faced by Marxism and socialism, to the so-called ‘crisis of the Marxist imaginary’. There is certainly, within post-Marxism, no ‘elegant coherence’ (Spivak, 1990: 15), we have, here, a field that is ‘highly varied and contradictory in nature’ (Beilharz, 2007), but I think there is an important unity to this moment, found in the engagement between, on the one hand, what Therborn (2008) describes as the Marxist triangle of historical social science, a philosophy of contradictions and socialist politics and, on the other, more recent, post-foundationalist currents in social theory. The best

attempt to understand this unity, in my opinion, is provided by Simon Tormey and Jules Townshend (2006). In particular, the six problems these authors view post-Marxists as posing to Marx and Marxism allow us to track a certain coherence among otherwise very diverse thinkers: the problem of history, the problem of revolutionary subjectivities, the problem of ethics, the problem of positivism, the problem of vanguardism and the problem of democracy. In the second part of this chapter, I will follow Tormey and Townshend in very selectively surveying post-Marxist analyses of, and responses to, these problems.

It seems to me that we can read the post-Marxist moment, after Jameson (1996: 1), as emerging at a time 'in which capitalism itself undergoes a structural metamorphosis', a Marxian engagement, to be crude, that responds to, and wrestles with, the arrival of what world-systems thinkers refer to as an 'age of transition' (Wallerstein, 2000b) or 'systemic chaos' (Arrighi, 2010). In this vein, in the first part of this chapter, I will suggest that a cluster of systemic transformations post-1968 provide the crucial backdrop to the development of post-Marxism and that, together, these changes are implicated in the so-called 'crisis of the Marxist imaginary' to which post-Marxism responds. And I will contend that the uncertainty issuing from these transformations can be read along two intimately related axes, axes crucial to social theory as a whole – diagnosis and utopia: that is, first, questions of mapping and understanding the social; and, second, questions of 'utopian reference' (Alexander, 2001), the expressions of the desire for a better way of being (Levitas, 1990; 2013).

Overall, I think it is hard today not to feel somewhat torn about post-Marxism. Perhaps Beilharz (2007) is right in maintaining that, 'In the long run, postmarxism will surely be known as Marxism'. In that case, post-Marxism's pluralism might be viewed as a welcome, truly Marxian effort to be as radical as our times, renewing a complex and still important tradition, in contrast to a Marxist orthodoxy that appears unsustainably necessitarian and hopelessly out of touch with the institutional and imaginative peculiarities of our modernity. Given these peculiarities, given the decidedly pluralist moment we are in, obdurate, closed Marxism clearly doesn't do the trick in answering fundamental problems posed to Marxism, and there is plenty of interest contained in the moments of post-Marxist inventiveness – variously, philosophical, political, theoretical. Nevertheless – against many of the stronger post-Marxist gestures – I think it is hard to escape a sense that, having passed through and beyond phases of 'post-modern conjuncturalism' (McLennan, 2006) and 'happy globalization' (Stephen Holmes in

Outhwaite and Ray 2005: 19), we are as easily reminded of our proximity to Marx and Marxism as of our distance from them, that, at worst, post-Marxism simply lets go of the powerful socialist resources of critique (class, totality, production as social, the questioning of the prioritization of economic emphases, of value, of profit, and of self-interest, say) and institutional alternatives, and comes to occupy an analytical space behind and short of Marxism.

### **Reading post-Marxism: the crisis of the Marxist imaginary**

A good place to start, I think, is Jameson's (1996: 1) contention that "Postmarxisms" regularly emerge at those moments in which capitalism itself undergoes a structural metamorphosis'. Historically, we might think of Bernstein's 'revisionism' or the emergence of Western Marxism as examples. For Jameson, the shape that this metamorphosis takes today is conditioned by the transformation captured by the phrase 'multinational capitalism'.

This idea is worth exploring. And, objectionable as some might find reading post-Marxism through a basically Marxist interpretative framework, I think that the world-systems analysis contention about our entry into an 'age of transition' from the late 1960s to the early 1970s is the most convincing way to understand the important factors in the emergence of post-Marxism: that is, post-Marxism as a set of responses to transformations in economic organization, political formations, structures of knowledge, social movements and cultural repertoires. These changes appear immediately relevant, in that the majority of those thinkers that could reasonably be designated 'post-Marxist' were born between the early 1920s and the early 1940s,<sup>4</sup> making such transformations plausibly central in their political and intellectual formation or re-orientation. Laclau (1990: 97), for instance, strenuously places his own post-Marxism within the context of the following kinds of social reconfigurations:

... structural transformations of capitalism have led to the decline of the classical working class in the post-industrial countries; the increasingly profound penetration of capitalist relations of production in areas of social life, whose dislocating effects – concurrent with those deriving from the forms of bureaucratisation which have characterised the welfare state – have generated new forms of social protest; the emergence of mass mobilisations in Third World countries which do not follow the classical pattern of class struggle; the crisis and

discrediting of the model of society put into effect in the countries of so-called 'actually existing socialism', including the exposure of new forms of domination established in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

There is, of course, something of a consensus around the reality of multidimensional social change post-'68, and a variety of attempts at characterization of such shifts – post-modernism, post-Fordism, informationalization, risk society, detraditionalization, reflexive modernity, globalization, for instance. What I would like to do is fairly loosely draw from the world-systems' framing of these transformations insofar as they might be seen as fundamentally reconfiguring the terrain on which Left intellectuals operate, both in terms of the horizon of the descriptive and explanatory tasks of social theory and in terms of utopian horizons. Interestingly, in these terms – theory, utopia – within commentary on post-1960s social transformation, we find two related narratives of decline: a decline of utopia narrative, and a demise of critical social theory and their intellectual carriers narrative, which can be translated into the world-systems language about a post-1970s 'crisis of the movements' and a simultaneous 'crisis of the ideologies/structures of knowledge' (Wallerstein, 1991b).

To begin chronologically, I will start with what Arrighi, Hopkins and Wallerstein (1989) have called 'the world revolution of 1968'. This revolution is crucial in the transformations we have seen subsequently. The argument runs that the 1848 rebellions across Central and Western Europe, and elsewhere, announce the arrival of the 'antisystemic movements', a family of movements with three principal variants – social democracy, communism and national liberation. Over time, these antisystemic movements became institutionalized features of the political landscape, and all three variants were, on one level, extraordinarily successful in coming to power and dominating the landscape of progressive thought and social change in the period 1945–1968.

These movements, Wallerstein (2002a) argues, shared some essential features – most prominently, increasingly wedded to a two-step strategy of social change, involving the capture of state power, followed by progressive social transformation. Despite their success, more and more these movements had a number of fundamental sets of complaints levelled at them, complaints that crystallize in the world revolution of 1968: that certain people had been left out, that they hadn't changed the world as promised, that they had been co-opted, and that they were repressive and exploitative and did not rule on behalf of the people

(Wallerstein, 1991b). For Wallerstein (1991b; 2002a), the crucial upshots of this revolution are a loss of faith both in these movements and in the state.

We might isolate four pressing sets of consequences of the revolution of '68 – three connected to the movements themselves, one a more general political consideration. First, the so-called 'social democratic consensus' and the related consensus around the notion of 'development', central in the period 1945–1970, are replaced by a period of neo-liberal commonsense and the so-called 'Washington Consensus' (Wallerstein, 2005b). Here, we witness the electoral and membership misfortunes of social democratic parties, and the capitulation of a good number of these parties to the neo-liberal agenda.

A second consequence is the end of the Bandung period of Southern unity and assertiveness, and of 'third worldism'. We have, here, the devastating impact on much of the periphery and semi-periphery of worldwide economic downturn, the debt crisis, and structural adjustment. In the face of this, the remnants of the national liberation movements still in power in the semi-periphery look ever more unlikely to regain any momentum and widespread support (Wallerstein, 1991b).

The third (arguably partial) consequence is the collapse of 'really existing socialism'. The events of 1989–1991 were, of course, immensely disorienting for many Left intellectuals, even those long critical of the Soviet alternative. In the world of theory, as Alexander (1995) points out, we witnessed a post-communist return to modernization and convergence themes; we see, likewise, 'capitalism' replaced by 'modernity' as starting point for social theory (Jameson, 2002); we see Left intellectuals wrestling with Fukuyama's end of history thesis and the equation 'end of socialism equals end of utopia equals end of history' (Kumar, 1993); and we see a burgeoning 'ethical turn' in social theory, one part of which obsessively concerns itself with the threat of 'totalitarianism', frequently located in the modern imaginary, and deployed as a moral brake on the utopian enterprise.

The fourth, more general, consequence is a widely commented upon generalized loss of faith in the state, and an accompanying transformation of politics. It is frequently said, of course, that, over the past three decades or so, we have seen growing scepticism towards the state, party machines and representative democracy. In the optimistic readings of such changes, we have, here, an expansion of the political, a bottom-up, reflexive, cosmopolitan politics, which stretches beyond the older hierarchies, channels and limitations of formal political involvement (Beck, 1997; 1999; Giddens, 1991). In the pessimistic readings, we have

a series of crises – of the state, of democracy, of legitimacy, of the public sphere – and a post-democratic or post-political condition: where politics becomes increasingly empty and mediatized, more and more eaten up by economics; where political options converge around minor variants on the neo-liberal theme; where citizens withdraw from parties and electoral contests, and parties withdraw from citizens; where state sovereignty and a potentially expanded conception of citizenship are increasingly under strain (Bauman, 1999; Castells, 2000; Crouch, 2004; Mair, 2006; Martin and Schumann, 1998; Zolo, 2001).

Second, we have economic crisis and transformation. The revolution of '68, the US loss in Vietnam, a B phase of economic stagnation, the shrinking productivity gap between America and other economic powers – together these bring us, world-systems thinkers insist, into a period of hegemonic transition, the effects of which we are still living with. This analysis has important resonances with many of the interpretations of the emergence of a new capitalism post-1970: a post-industrial age (Bell, 1999); post-Fordism/disorganized capitalism (Offe, 1985; Lash and Urry, 1987); the knowledge or information society (Webster, 2002); multinational capitalism (Jameson, 1984a; 1996; Harvey, 1989); fast capitalism (Agger, 2004); flexible capitalism (Sennett, 1998; 2006); the aesthetic economy (Bohme, 2003); a new third spirit of capitalism (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005); informationalism (Castells, 1997; 1998). Such characterizations have attempted to capture new or emerging axiomatic features of ultra-contemporary capitalist organization: for instance – information as a new, directly productive force; a new emphasis on flexibility in production and in labour; changes in patterns of production and consumption; neo-liberal restructuring; changes in class composition and a weakening of organized labour against capital; a reconfiguration of the international division of labour and a new, intensive, and highly competitive phase of global networking; changes to corporate structures; financialization.

Clearly, these sorts of shifts have had important implications for the ways intellectuals have mapped the world and for the societal and institutional alternatives connected to such theorizing. For instance, by 1970 the size and power of the industrial working class in the West had reached its peak (Therborn, 2001), and the neo-liberal assault (made possible, in part, by the crisis of the antisystemic movements already referred to), deindustrialization and growing internationalization arguably combined to transform labour, undermining the solidarity and power of that working class. One obvious consequence of this was to cast further doubt on the notion of this class as the primary agent



of social transformation, as well as on the traditionally conceived-direction of such transformation. More generally, neo-liberalism, for some, has shifted 'the parameters of commonsense' (Hall, 1988: 188), from equality, solidarity and justice towards liberty, competition and individualism, deflating utopian aspirations before the hidden hand (Fuller, 2005) and necessitarian rhetoric ('there is no alternative'). And, in a related vein, restructuring pressures within the university, and accompanying professionalization and commodification of knowledge, have been viewed as posing severe challenges to the historic tradition of critical intellectual life.

Such challenges are often seen as intimately linked, too, to cultural transformations. One of the consequences of the world revolution of '68 was the rise of the 'new social movements'. These movements are an important condition of the so-called 'cultural turn' in both social life and in social and political theory – for instance, in shifting what Nancy Fraser (2003) describes as the grammar of political claims-making towards emphases on identity, difference, cultural domination and recognition. We can link these movements (as well as the process of 'de-ruralization'), too, with what Therborn (2001) calls 'the erosion of traditional deference' (or what others have called 'detraditionalization'), which, in turn, is connected to a growing 'pluralization of lifeworlds' (Boggs, 1993) and individualization across social orders. For some, the changes entailed here have gone so far as to issue in a 'new personality' (Castells, 2000; Gauchet, 2000), which appears completely out of step with the collectivist, egalitarian, solidaristic anthropological premises of a former utopian imaginary.

We see such transformations signalled in social and political theory, as questions of selfhood and identity increasingly became central thematics, with constant underscoring of fragmentation, permanent construction and reconstruction, strategy over solidity, movement over rootedness. This is bound up with shifts in what Wallerstein (1991b; 1991c; 1997a; 1999a; 1999c; 2006b) calls the 'structures of knowledge', most importantly, a shift away from 'scientific universalism' – universal laws, progress, determinism, the canons, formal rationality, Eurocentrism and objectivity. The direction these shifts have taken, under pressure from challenges such as feminism, the critique of Eurocentrism and the questioning of science, is the post-modernization of intellectual life. This post-modernization, in part, appears to return to a liberal sense of limits around what we can know and do (Beilharz, 1994): the critique of universalist, redemptive, totalizing metanarratives, of closure, of capitalized Truth, Rationality, and Science (which

are read as ineradicably particular rather than universal), and of the erasure of difference. Thus, for Therborn (2000b), at the beginning of the twenty-first century, social scientific answers to the traditional questions of social cosmology, directionality of the world and appropriate mode of cognition are answered, respectively, as follows: strategies, contingency, and understanding and discourse.

These changes, once again, appear to unsettle older ways of mapping our social worlds and established imaginings of progressive social change (diagnosis and critique, alternatives and transformatory strategy (Wright, 2006)). We see, here, Foucault's (1980) argument about an actual and morally positive movement from universal to specific intellectuals, and Bauman's (1987) congruent suggestion of a post-modern shift in intellectual function from legislation to interpretation. We see, too, in challenges to commitments to progress, aspirations to totalizing knowledge, and assumptions of unity, caution towards, or forthright criticism of, utopian blueprints and the idea of revolution, in the name of difference, for fear of totalitarianism, in an elevation of the ethical over the political.

Putting aside a raft of obvious objections, I think the case can be made that these transformations intertwine by the late 1980s and into the 1990s – the period of 'happy globalization' – into an overriding sense that 'the utopian mentality is withering away' (Kolakowski, 1990: 143), that 'the utopian itself has been in general suspension since the mid-seventies', bringing a 'remorseless closure of space' (Anderson, 2004: 71). And, related, these changes fed into a sense that the historic tradition of oppositional intellectual social theorizing and criticism was outmoded in the face of newly hegemonic emphases in theorizing – difference, reflexivity, post-positivism, ethical and cultural turns, anti-totalization, pluralism (McLennan, 2006), scepticism about the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (Baudrillard, 1983), distance from those 'four sins of modernist theorizing' (universalism, reductionism, functionalism, essentialism) (McLennan, 1996) and so on. Thus Peter Wagner (2001a: 1) notes that doubts have 'arisen during the closing decades of the twentieth century as to whether the social sciences' way of observing, interpreting and explaining the world really brought superior insights into the social life of human beings'.

Post-Marxism, it seems to me, is clearly an expression of these sorts of transformations and a set of responses to the challenges posed by such changes to socialist intellectuals. I will return to these transformations in a concluding note, because I think that by the end of the 1990s we see another set of shifts that, in turn, troubled the assumption that

post-Marxist trajectories had adequately answered questions tied to the 'crisis of the Marxist imaginary'.

## **The thematic unity of post-Marxism**

I now want to turn back to those introductory remarks about the difficulties entailed in thinking the unity of the post-Marxist moment. Tormey and Townshend's (2006) identification of six problems addressed by post-Marxism to Marx and Marxism seems the best way in here, and I will work through these as a way of exploring some of the commonalities that can be detected in apparently very different post-Marxist trajectories. This approach also serves as a way of moving towards consideration of the dilemmas entailed by these trajectories and addressing the question, whither post-Marxism?

First problem – history. The problem of history is what Tormey and Townshend (2006: 212) describe as the 'common suspicion of the teleological narrative that is seen to underpin Marx's work'. Across post-Marxism, we find a critique of teleology, of functionalism, determinism, of 'external guarantees' (Badiou 2003a: 130); and we find a corresponding emphasis instead on 'the political' or 'politics'. Thus, Heller (1991; Heller and Feher, 1988) rejects the redemptive politics of 'radical universalism', which is underpinned by the notion of goals in History. Such universalism imagines the existence of rationally predictable institutions, and envisages single emancipatory gestures that would bring history to an end. We can see these emphases, too, in Castoriadis's early arguments against a Marxism that read history as rational and closed, which, for him, effectively eliminated struggle from history. More generally, Castoriadis (1987) came to reject traditional ontology's equation of being with 'being determined', underscoring instead the Abyss or groundlessness of being, insisting on the fundamental creativity entailed in the production of meaning and society, and the radical historicity and particularity of the forms and figures of social formations (Howard and Pacom, 1998: 87; Castoriadis 1987: 181; 1997a: 274).

What we are left with, as I have said, is something like the priority of politics or the political. That is, we are urged to face up to a world of constant struggle, of endless, undetermined political construction and reconstruction. In this vein, Gramsci has frequently been identified as an important ancestor to, and influence on, post-Marxist thinkers. As Bauman (2002: 334) puts it, 'Gramsci immunized me once and for all against brain-paralyzing bacilli of systems, structures, function, billiard-ball models of the agent and mirror models of the subject's mind,

determined past and preordained future'.<sup>5</sup> This Gramscian turn is, of course, most pronounced in Laclau and Mouffe, where the political is deemed prior to the social, and systemness, cohesivity and patterning in social life are not to be thought of as grounds but as horizons, always threatened, always 'a hegemonic attempt at articulation' (Laclau, 1990: 214; 1996: 103). How to analyse this structuration in social life, or the degrees of institutionalization that are found within the social, then, has become the focus of Laclau's (1990: 61, 224; 2014) subsequent work of conceptual elaboration (demands, articulation, logics of equivalence and difference, horizons, frontiers, nodal points, empty signifiers, sedimentation and reactivation, and so on), as a replacement for historical materialism.

Second problem – revolutionary subjectivity. This problem centres on the critique of the notion of the working class as the primary force in progressive social change, and has variously involved the re-imagining by post-Marxist thinkers of transformatory agency, social struggles and political identity. Castoriadis and Lefort were, for instance, early observers of the increasingly differentiated struggles within contemporary capitalist social orders (Curtis, 1988); and Castoriadis (1988b; 2010a) initially recasts, and thereby expands and pluralizes, the fundamental division within modern societies as that between directors and executants, with self-management an aspiration underpinning and uniting the variety of forms of social contestation. Similarly, the Italian workerist notion of 'the social factory' is later reworked by Hardt and Negri (2000; 2004) in ideas of 'immaterial labour' and 'the multitude', underscoring plurality and singularity, against the automatic subaltern unity imagined by orthodox Marxism. The 'new social movements', of course, have been a constant point of reference for Laclau and Mouffe and others in the shift from class to demands, from Emancipation to emancipations, from identity as recognition to identity as construction, and from assumed unity and homogeneity to difference and articulation. No longer, for post-Marxists, is it sufficient to separate the material and 'objective interests' from the 'merely cultural' and chosen or constructed identities (Butler, 1998).

Third problem – ethics. As Lawrence Wilde (2001) notes, orthodox Marxism has a history of radical denial about ethical questions, a 'moral constipation', in Steven Lukes's colourful phrase. In response to the 'ethical deficit' of Marxist orthodoxy, and paired with anti-foundationalist, anti-teleological and pluralist emphases, a number of post-Marxists – Heller, Bauman, Derrida, Lyotard, for instance – have been important contributors to the so-called 'ethical turn'. On the

other hand, the ethical turn is viewed sceptically by those post-Marxists insisting on the priority of the political (Castoriadis or Laclau [1990: 84], for instance).<sup>6</sup> At the extreme edge of such scepticism we find Žižek's (2001a) and Badiou's (2001; 2003a; 2005b) scathing rejections of Arendt, Levinas and ethical musings centred on the danger of totalitarianism,<sup>7</sup> our infinite responsibility to the Other, the prioritization of respect for difference and enthusiasm around the expansion of a global discourse of human rights. Nevertheless, even here we see something of an ethical impulse that provides a contrast to Marxist orthodoxy: for those who prioritize the political, in the responsibility and autonomy implied by the recognition of contingency and openness (Castoriadis's (1997b) 'ethics or mortality', for instance); for Badiou and Žižek, in some variety of a Lacanian ethics of the Real, a fidelity to Truths.

Fourth problem – positivism. Here, we find a distancing from the alignment between Marxism and the natural sciences found in the orthodox Marxist trajectory from Engels to the Second and Third Internationals, and a critique of the connections this alignment has with the exercise of domination (Tormey and Townshend, 2006). We see, too, a rejection of a 'theological' (Castoriadis, 1997a) approach to social criticism, and a corresponding pluralism and pragmatism in theoretical terms (Mouzelis, 1990). Often important, in this respect, is the post-modern questioning of Enlightenment emphases on truth, science, rationality and of the associated Modern desire to know, control and order (Bauman, 1987; Feher and Heller, 1987: 205), to pursue what Castoriadis (1987)<sup>8</sup> called the 'unlimited expansion of rational mastery'.

Fifth problem – vanguardism. This is the problem of the prioritization of the party within Marxist orthodoxy. As Lovell (1986: 30) notes, Marx was unclear about the relationship between his project and the working-class movement, about the links between leaders, intellectuals, parties and the mass of people. And, of course, there is an oscillation within Marx's work, and within Marxism more widely, between a materialist insistence that the liberation of the working class is necessarily the work of the working class itself and, on the other hand, the promotion of science and its carriers to a crucial role in progressive social transformation (Boggs, 1984; Femia, 1993; Gupta, 2000). It is arguably this latter tendency which dominates orthodox Marxism, where the question of the agents of socialist transformation is effectively answered by emphases on intellectuals, party, theory and programme (Tormey, 2004) while, at the same time, emphases on necessity, History and proletariat have obscured what is at stake here (Gupta, 2000).

Post-Marxists, by contrast, have been far more careful on issues of power and knowledge when addressing questions of theory, intellectuals and organization, and they have tended to distance themselves from the elitism, vanguardism and substitutionism of Marxist orthodoxy. For a start, 'really existing socialism' has, of course, been a crucial 'reality problem' for the Marxian tradition, and a number of post-Marxists have engaged in seminal analyses and critiques of these regimes – in doing so, attempting to separate them from socialism as it could be: for instance, Feher et al. (1986) on communism as a 'dictatorship over needs'; Bauman on communism as modernity at its most determined; and Negri and Castoriadis on communism as a form of state capitalism. In Castoriadis, Bauman, Heller, Hardt and Negri, for instance, we find clear echoes of the Left communist critique of both Leninism and social democracy, with emancipation instead equalling self-emancipation, with Science and its carriers dethroned. At the same time, ultra-Left spontaneism is seldom seen as an adequate answer, given the strong critique of teleological understandings of history and, for most post-Marxists, there still seems to be some sort of role for organization and intellectuals.<sup>9</sup>

Sixth problem – democracy. In light of the undemocratic history of Marxist orthodoxy, how do we approach the question of democracy today? What can socialism mean after Stalinism and the events of 1989–91, and within the context of what Boggs (1993) calls the 'crisis of Modernity', with the entailed 'turn to the local', 'dispersal of social movement activity', 'pluralization of social life-worlds and opposition', 'resurgence of civil society', and impacts of new technology and media-tization? There is, within post-Marxism, a real tussle with questions about the relationship between socialism, democracy and liberalism. For some post-Marxists, democracy (albeit a radicalized democracy) overtakes socialism as the goal of emancipatory action, with the old opposition between liberalism and socialism erased. The tone here is more cautious, plural, diffuse (Bauman, 2002; Heller and Feher, 1988: 32; Heller, 1987; Lefort, 1986; 1988). Here, liberalism and democratic institutions can no longer be casually dismissed (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Lefort, 1988). Gone, too, very often, is the Marxist demand for the end of private property, the withering of the state, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the dismissal of rights as so much bourgeois verbiage, with socialism now a sub-set of demands internal to a wider Democratic Revolution.

On the other hand, the ultra-Leftist critique of capitalism and the state remains the order of the day for post-Marxists such as Castoriadis,

Hardt and Negri, and Badiou. In a sense, though, even here, I think we could run with Boltanski's (2002) contention that we have witnessed a pervasive 'moderation' in utopian terms and a withdrawal from totalizing transformative schemes. Boltanski argues that we have seen, in recent times, a shift from the formerly dominant Left vision of, and commitment to, 'total revolution'. Today, says Boltanski, the Left speaks the language of democracy, rights, and citizenship. Thus, even in the ultra-Leftist imaginings of Hardt and Negri (2000) the programmatic moment consists of rights demands – global citizenship, a social wage and reappropriation (Žižek, 2004).

## **Evaluating post-Marxism**

Each of these problems, and the variety of post-Marxist answers to them, seem pressing when reflecting on the issue of Marxism's 'broken triangle' of social science, philosophy and politics (Therborn, 2008) and on the question of the extent to which socialism still constitutes a significant counter-culture of our modernity (Bauman, 1976; Beilharz, 1999). Yet, as Tormey and Townshend (and others) point out, these post-Marxist responses are themselves open to a number of critical questions. This appears to me to be especially the case in light of another set of shifts, shifts that have made those parallel narratives of decline – of utopian reference and of the classical values and aspirations of social theory – look less convincing. In particular, I think that by the second half of the 1990s both of these narratives had unravelled somewhat – they and, with them, that moment of 'happy globalization' were simply facing too many 'reality problems'.

Particularly important, I think, were a number of key events, mobilizations and processes through and beyond the 1990s that, together, 'punctured' (Callinicos, 2003) both of these stories. I am thinking here of the following variety of factors: major mobilizations against neo-liberal restructuring (for instance, France 1995) – it hardly seems credible to say today, as Anderson (2000: 7) did at the beginning of the twenty-first century, that neo-liberalism stands as 'the most successful ideology in world history'; the East Asian Crisis of 1997 and subsequent 'contagion' followed, a decade later, by another profoundly dislocating financial crisis, of which we are still in the midst; the growth of right-wing populism, in Europe and elsewhere; the gathering momentum of the anti-globalization movement – from the Zapatista rebellion to the 'coming out party' at the WTO's third ministerial in Seattle, 1999 – and, more recently, the 'Arab Spring' and the Occupy movement; significant

dissent in the semi-periphery against the Washington Consensus; the rise of political Islam; and a 'new pessimism' (Murden, 2002) about globalization bringing a 'clash of civilizations', a 'rise of tribes', 'Balkanization' and so on.

In a theoretical register, I think we have some corollaries. Gregor McLennan (2000; 2003) has spoken of an emerging 'new positivity' in the social sciences. Part of this involves a reaction against what McLennan (2003) calls the 'negativity' and 'excessive self-scrutiny' of post-modern theory. According to McLennan (2000: 18; 2002), this new positivity entails a somewhat deflationary attitude towards theory and a 'more substantive and affirmative' direction in theoretical work. We are seeing, here, a return to concern with the 'logic of the social' (McLennan, 2000: 18), to the 'state of things' (McLennan, 2002: 323), to the ambition 'to actually say something about the structure and direction of the world we inhabit, and about the values which will guide a better human future' (McLennan, 1999: 566). Here, the challenges mounted to social theory through the post-modernizing period – challenges to reductionism, functionalism, determinism, universalism, and the problematization of objectivism, realism, enlightenment, rationality and explanation (McLennan 1996; 2002) – are thought vital, progressive, inescapable; but this new positivity involves a recognition that the social sciences cannot do without some version of these emphases and values.<sup>10</sup>

The result of all this, I think, is that we are seeing something of a comeback both of utopian reference and of more affirmative social theorizing and self-assured criticism: we are seeing real productivity in terms of utopian reference since the late 1990s, with numerous thinkers calling for a return to utopian 'thinking beyond' and developing utopian alternatives that insist 'another world is possible';<sup>11</sup> and, at the same time, we are seeing projects of social and political theorizing that represent something of a return to the classical modality in terms of the combination of conceptualization, explanation and ambitious substantive work (McLennan, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

If these suggestions are plausible, then I feel that the post-Marxist identification of problems within Marx and Marxism, and its responses to such problems, might seem less weighty today. On this score, despite their sympathy with the broad thrust of the post-Marxist engagement with Marxism, Tormey and Townshend are critical before every one of those unifying problems and, again, it is worth running through some of what they have to say, before a concluding note that draws some of these hesitations together. With respect to the question of history,



post-Marxists often caricature Marx and Marxism, and frequently simply offer a replacement meta-narrative. On the question of revolutionary subjectivities, have we not seen, since the emergence of the anti-globalization movement, precisely a return of 'materialist' political contestation spoken to by the Marxist tradition? In the case of the problem of ethics, the often accompanying retreat from radical politics by post-Marxists could be seen as again out of step with the radicality of transformative politics emerging today. On the issue of positivism, Tormey and Townshend are concerned that 'positivism' becomes an obfuscatory charge, especially given that many post-modern-influenced thinkers continue to work in a parallel way – totalization, grand-narratives, explanatory schemas and so on. With respect to the problem of vanguardism, Tormey and Townshend are sceptical about whether post-Marxists are able to completely escape from the charges they level at Marxists.<sup>13</sup> And, finally, with regard to the problem of democracy, Tormey and Townshend contend that many post-Marxists, while extolling the virtues of democracy, do not analyse with sufficient rigour the conditions for such democracy.

These all seem to me to be rather important, effective points and, in conjunction with my speculative comments about a late 1990s return of utopian reference and expansive social theorizing, they take some of the wind out of the sails of the idea of post-Marxism as a successor discourse to Marxism. Related issues are raised by turning back to initial definitional difficulties – that is, the character of the post-Marxist confrontation with Marx and Marxism. Centrally, there is a dialogue established within post-Marxism between Marx and Marxism, on the one hand, and post-foundational thought, on the other. It is clear that this is an uneven dialogue across post-Marxism. For instance, in Laclau, the Marx and Marxism side seems at the most residual and contingent. Wanting to hold on to certain (rather minimal) Marxian insights, such as 'human beings have no other nature than the one they give themselves in the social production of their own existence', Laclau (1990: 242) insists that Marxism was only *one* possible starting point in the development of the theoretical and political ideas outlined in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Apparently, Marx and Marxism can almost be forgotten. Here, as in Castoriadis (1988b), we might have to put some or all of the Marxist body to death in order to save the spirit, a spirit equated with something like radical critique, autonomy.

For others, it is clear that the 'name "Marx" is – in a certain sense – entirely uncircumventable' (Derrida in Magnus and Cullenberg, 1995: x), providing, in Spivak's (1995: 113) words, 'dynamic materials'. For others

still, the question of Marxism as a label is avoided, and perhaps for good reasons, since Marx himself, as we know, declared that he was not a Marxist. We might, in this vein, nominate Edward Said as a post-Marxist thinker and look at his approach to such an issue. Constantly drawing from Marx and Marxism – Gramsci, Williams, Adorno, C. L. R. James, and others – Said (2001: 441), in an exemplary post-Marxist move, insists that ‘I am not concerned with schools of thought if the issue is membership ... we must eclectically choose specific elements and reformulate them in a new approach through our new discourses’. Proclaiming oneself to be a Marxist of this or that stripe makes no sense to Said if you are unattached to a political constituency, if Marxism is a ‘compensation for the loss of the divine’ (Said, 2001: 158) or a mere academic sub-speciality (Said, 2001: 42, 57, 77, 158, 222, 438).

And, finally, for yet others, Marxism still designates a political-intellectual endeavour that remains important in placing their thought – Jameson, Žižek, Badiou. A post-Marxism of this stripe, I think, could quite legitimately ask some probing questions of the more distanced iterations of post-Marxism that, at times, seem to assert that we are simply *beyond* Marx and Marxism. Marx and Marxism are surely plural; we have, here, a ‘rich combination of cultures’ (Beilharz, 2002: 5) and do not many of those post-Marxist critiques – Marxism simply as a mirror of production, as eliminating struggle from history, as a grand narrative we can do without, as irretrievably and illegitimately determinist and universalist – look a little harder to maintain today? Do they not seem a tad totalizing, inattentive to difference and caught in their own metanarrative about the passage from modernity to post-modernity? Those who have imagined we might pin Marxism down to a simple set of now irrelevant axioms are doing great violence to a tradition that can contain Gramsci and Adorno and Pannekoek and Luxemburg and Kautsky and Debord and Korsch.<sup>14</sup> And, on this note, in getting closer to this thing, ‘post-Marxism’, it is worth noting the apparent proximity of post-Marxism to Western Marxism – post-Marxism perhaps simply as ‘Western Marxism, only up-to-date’. That is to say, both are rather culturalist in orientation, more pragmatic than Marxist orthodoxy and searching beyond the Marxian canon for resources, marked by defeat, contained largely in the academy (Anderson, 1976) and critical, even if this is sometimes muted, of Leninism as well as of social democracy (Aronowitz, 1981).

In a related vein, it is hard, I think, not to be tempted by Perry Anderson’s (1983) argument that there is nothing that matches Marxism in terms of scope and moral force. Today, in particular, as

Tormey and Townshend argue, in the face of globalization and its pressing discontents, are we not drawn back to Marx and the Marxian tradition? Is there anything that compares when endeavouring to map our globalizing present? Does *post-Marxism*, for instance, ever offer us anything that comes near to the power of a world-systems analysis? Is there any analytical or political gain in dedicating ourselves wholeheartedly to post-Marxism? That is to say, across post-Marxism, we have a range of interventions at very different levels – ontological reconsiderations (Castoriadis, Badiou), conceptual reconstruction (Laclau), grand, totalizing theoretical work that seeks to map the world (Hardt and Negri). And the most interesting work, for me, is that expansive theoretical effort, attached to a more ambitious, emphatic *socialist* politics, in line with McLennan's argument about the 'new positivity' of our theoretical moment, and away from the sometimes paralyzing obsessions with reflexivity, difference and the cautious multidimensionality of the period of post-modernism's theoretical hegemony. For instance, I certainly believe that Laclau's development of a new conceptual apparatus provides a useful set of considerations as an analytical strategy (Andersen, 2003). Yet, doubts have to remain. In the substantive analyses stemming from the so-called Essex School, do we really find anything that a sophisticated Marxist thinker might not already be attentive to? Do we find anything that is a significant advance on the scope and subtlety of a Perry Anderson, a Fredric Jameson, an Eric Hobsbawm? I think the answer has to be a clear no. Instead, these analyses often seem rather *blank and formal*. This, to me, seems very clear in many Laclau-inspired analyses of political identities and discourses, which simply get pulled into their constituent pieces to reveal that there are no foundations, identity is precarious, relationally constructed, that identity coheres around some contingent nodal point that is, in truth, empty of substantive content, while viewed (incorrectly) by participants as 'points of supreme plenitude of meaning' (Stavrakakis, 1997: 274), etc., etc. But what is the real analytical and political purchase of such formulaic moves?

At the same time, stubborn Marxist orthodoxy hardly seems an option at our undoubtedly pluralist moment, and what Docherty (1996: 243) suggests that post-Marxism gives us – an interrogation of Marx 'in the interests of a proper historicity', a pluralizing move against aspirations to doctrinal purity and the illusion of orthodox Marxism as self-sufficient diagnostic template and remedy for everything – is inescapable for any socialist-minded reinvention of a theoretical language and compelling set of utopian references today.<sup>15</sup> Post-Marxism

is, though, a 'series of gestures' some of which might, after all, come to be seen precisely as moments *within* Marxism (Beilharz, 2007), within the wealth of efforts made to establish a dialogue between Marx and contemporary social settings. Surely, this engagement, as Castoriadis (1987: 9) once said, remains 'immediate and inevitable' for anyone interested in society. In that case, then, Marx and Marxism are still there as indispensable, though not lone, figures on our (post)modern socialist horizons.