

«Moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste»

Karl Marx

«Як на мене, я не марксист»

Карл Маркс



Герсон Шер

доктор філософії,
член Колегії міжнародних
радників Національного фонду
досліджень України,
член редколегії
науково-популярного журналу
«Світогляд»,
м. Вашингтон, США

In his several essays published in *Svitohlyad*¹, Professor *Kul'chitskyi* has made an important contribution to the understanding of the relationship between the ideology of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism and the theory and vision of *Karl Marx*. He has done this by using new terminology to describe the socioeconomic political system of the Soviet state, but also by categorically rejecting the notion that the system and its ideological justification basis had anything to do with Marx's theory of communism. In fact, as he suggests, the fall of the Soviet Union had little if anything to do with the fall of communism, since the Soviet system had nothing to do with the concept of communism as envisioned by *Marx* and *Engels*. It must also be said that his article and his critique of the Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideological system could never have appeared during the Soviet period. It would have been considered subversive and he would have suffered serious consequences as a result.

In this essay, I will share with the reader an account of a group of Marxist philosophers in another so-called communist country who did exactly that, namely, to use Marxism openly as a tool for criticizing the shortcomings and hypocrisy of their own country and its leaders. They did this by publishing a philosophical journal for many years. The journal was «banned» occasionally by the government when they got too «close» to sensitive issues, such as nationalism. This was *the group of Praxis philosophers* in Yugoslavia between approximately 1964 and the mid-1970s².

I.

The movement called «*Marxist humanism*» beginning in the mid-1960s arose at a time of great social upheaval, both in the Soviet-dominated countries of Eastern Europe and the West as well. Philosophers in France, Germany, Italy, and even America began re-examining the works of Karl Marx, particularly his early writings, in search of a radical understanding and critique of the social dislocations that were erupting in mass protests in their countries. Earlier radical Marxist writers and activists like *Rosa Luxemburg*, *Antonio Gramsci*, and *György Lukács* also made a «comeback» among Western scholars. At the same time, in Eastern Europe, philosophers in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia were searching for re-interpretations of Marxist theory that could be used to better understand their societies' stagnation and offer paths forward in similar language, but different content, used by their political elites.

This new school of thought, never to my knowledge, percolated through to the Soviet Union. Since it is not well known to the readers of this journal, I would like to devote the next few pages to describing the theoretical foundations of this new perspective.

For the young Karl Marx, and the later one as well, *the core premise was criticism*. In one of his earliest known writings, a letter to his Young Hegelian friend *Arnold Ruge* in 1844, he wrote:

«*But if the designing of the future and the proclamation of ready-made solutions for all time is not our affair, then we realize all the more clearly what we have to accomplish in the present – I am speaking of a ruthless criticism of everything existing, ruthless in two senses: The criticism must not be afraid of its own conclusions, nor of conflict with the powers that be*»³.

¹ С. Кульчицький. Командна економіка як продукт ленинської системи влади і власності. Світогляд 2024, №1, с.14-18.

² I devoted my Ph.D. dissertation, which became my first book, to their intellectual and political history. See Gerson S. Sher, *Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

³ Karl Marx, Letter to Arnold Ruge (1844), in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1972), 8.

If criticism, including criticism «*of its own conclusions*», was the central guiding principle of Marx's work, then it is quite understandable that it had no home in Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist ideology. Marx himself was at his core a critic, and a feisty and fierce one at that. From his earliest days to the end of his life, he was constantly engaged in fights with other theorists, particularly on the Left.

A second fundamental concept in Marx's early work was the concept of human creation, praxis, along with the companion processes of «*externalization*», «*objectification*», «*reification*», and «*alienation*». This is precisely where Marx parted ways with *Hegel* and his followers, who speculated about what happens in the world of ideas, not the material world. In his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844⁴ and other writings, he held that the act of creation, praxis, is the essential quality of human beings. For Marx the philosopher, the process of human creations becoming externalized — strange, estranged, alien, and even hostile to the creator — is the central problem of all human existence. This, judging by Marx's early, formative writings, is the core of the Marxian dialectic, Marx's earth-bound inversion of Hegel's abstract dialectic of ideas, the engine which for Marx drives human history.

A third, essential concept to understand, is ideology. For Marx, ideology was not just blatant lies or «*false consciousness*» (the latter was Friedrich Engel's invention, ten years after Marx's death), but something much more complex. As he explained in *The German Ideology* (1846–1847), his most important work prior to the Communist Manifesto:

*«For each new class which puts itself in the plane of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aim, to represent its interest as the common interest of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universally valid ones»*⁵.

A corollary to the foregoing discussion about criticism and ideology is that Marx was a critic of ideology extraordinaire. He spent his early years in endless, bitter arguments with early socialists like the followers of *Saint-Simon* and the Young Hegelians. Even into his later life, some of his most violent (literally) explosions were reserved for the anarchist *Mikhail Bakunin*, with whom, according to legend, he wrestled viciously on the floor of his apartment. *Das Kapital* itself was, in a way, an elaborate rebuttal of *Adam Smith's Wealth of Nations*. In this sense, it was a lifelong obsession of Karl Marx to debunk and expose the flawed and hypocritical narratives of the ruling capitalist class. He did not live long enough to apply his critical method to the next iteration, emergence of a «*communist*» ruling class in Russia. That work was taken up by others, as I will discuss in Section III.

II.

Allow me to pause with a short discourse to illustrate the dialectical nature of praxis, of human creation, which, at least based on his early, formative works, is the philosophical, ontological core of Marx's theory of history as well as ideas.

When I create a tool, a book, or an idea, I do so with purpose and an image of how it might look, function, and be an expression of my being. But from the moment of creation, that which I create becomes a separate entity. This is the process of «*objectification*» or externalization.

Down the road, the tool might also be used by someone else for their purposes, not mine.

Thus, when that tool, book, or idea is picked up by others, it has the potential of being completely disassociated from me. To others, it simply becomes a thing, devoid of my conception of it, my ideas for it, my love of it, my expression of self. It becomes a thing. This is *reification*. It may serve someone else as a footstool, or the idea might be misunderstood and corrupted by others for their own purposes, which may be hostile to my own. But what is immediately important is that at the very moment of creation, it acquires an existence independent of me. If the idea in the book is judged to be interesting enough to sell well, it may be «*commoditized*» and published. It is *alienated* from me. I no longer have any control over what happens to it (except, maybe, for responding to a hostile book review), whether the value I receive for it is comparable to the intrinsic value I place on it. (I am skipping over the entire issue of the creation of money, which itself is a thing.)

Thus, while I may see my book as a noble encomium of human liberation, it may be purchased and used cynically by those in power as an instrument of oppression. Creative power becomes depersonalized economic power, which enters into a mutually reinforcing relationship with political power. Eventually, rulers, especially authoritarian ones, find it expedient to hire special people who create narratives that serve the purpose of legitimizing the rulers' power and privileges. In their fully developed form, these narratives are called «*ideologies*». And sometimes, religions, including state religions.

We can easily see how this process worked its way out in the history of Marxism. As Kul'chitskyi has pointed out, subsequent «*Marxists*» appropriated Marx's ideas in a superficial and often even dishonest way to fit their own circumstances and ambitions. The «*diamat*» of Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism was, in fact, a distorted and one-dimensional version of the simplistic damage done to the Marxist-Hegelian dialectic, in my view, by Friedrich Engels (see his *Dialectics of Nature*) and enroute to Russia, by George Plekhanov. Lenin compounded the damage with his simplistic «*theory of reflection*», which ultimately became the basis of his doctrine of the infallibility of the Party. And once the Party became the new ruling class, it employed its statist, authoritarian interpretation of Marxism as the new state religion, while chanting the mantra of radical equality, freedom, and the coming of heaven on earth. «*The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e., the class that is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force*»⁶

III.

To understand how this dynamic process of praxis worked itself out in Marx's own time in the realm of the interpretation of his own work, I would say that practically as soon as it was written down, it became «*objectified*» and «*reified*» when it became adopted by other less sophisticated advocates, such as Engels, and by social movements. From philosophy, in alienated form, it became doctrine and an article of faith. Organizations, institutions, and movements have little tolerance for sophisticated philosophical or historical discussions. They require certainty, simplicity, easy description, uniform interpretation, and authority.

⁴ K. Marx, «*Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1843-1844*,» in Tucker (ed.), 52-103.

⁵ K. Marx, «*The German Ideology*,» in Tucker (ed.), 138.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136

I would boil this down to the following simple aphorism: *Marx was not a Marxist*. As he wrote toward the end of his life in 1883, «*Moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*». The immediate context of these words was the doctrinaire «*Marxism*» that arose in France in 1882, which denied the validity of reformism in the struggles of the working class. This became a major rift by the 1890s in Europe with reformist «*revisionists*» like **Eduard Bernstein**, and in Russia between **Lenin's** radical Bolsheviks and the gradualist, reform-minded Mensheviks⁷.

In what may be a grossly oversimplified narrative, it is my sense that once Marx encountered Engels, new, less sophisticated elements crept into the theory. Friedrich Engels was not a philosophically sophisticated person; he was a very practical English industrialist, for whom A led to B and B led to C without fail. For example, to my knowledge, Marx never referred to the «*iron laws of history*». This was Engels's doing. Engels's crowning «*philosophical*» work, *The Dialectics of Nature*, was a parody not only of Hegel's dialectic but also of Marx's historical critical dialectical method. It was from this grounding that subsequent Marxist theorists, especially Russians starting with **Georgiy Plekhanov**, embraced this rigid, lawlike version, attempting to apply it to non-capitalist societies. In this fashion, Marx's critical method devolved, in the hands of Russian Marxists in particular, into a dogmatic doctrine that, when the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, was well suited to serving as the basis for the ruling ideas of the new ruling class.

The idea of an actual communist government as a «*new class*» was of course anathema to the Soviets. But it was picked up in another corner of the Comintern – Yugoslavia – after **Tito** broke with **Stalin** in 1948. The most well-known advocate of this view was Tito's comrade-in-arms, **Milovan Djilas**, who argued, in his book *The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System* (1957), that Stalinism was simply another form of class society and that its ruling ideology, Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism, was a corrupt and cynical use of Marxism to justify and perpetuate its rule. The public articulation of this aspect of Marx's critical historical method, the introduction of critical class analysis of so-called «*socialist*» or «*communist*» society, was a new and threatening element to «*the powers that be*». As for Djilas himself, he was ejected from the party, but he set a powerful new precedent: You could use the language of Marxism as a tool to criticize «*the powers that be*» even in so-called communist countries.

Djilas's heretical book did not appear out of nowhere. The League of Communists of Yugoslavia (LCY) found itself in 1948 in strange intellectual territory. Tito had effectively upended the entire Marxist-Leninist-Stalinist doctrine by repudiating Stalin. But being Party-minded, they needed something to replace the old thinking. Over the next few years, there were calls for a «*struggle of opinions*» within the Party between the old guard and younger thinkers, such as **Mihailo Marković** from Belgrade and **Gajo Petrović** from Zagreb. They scoured Marx's work to find the right weapons to dismantle Soviet doctrine and to develop a new Marxist theoretical basis

for the new Yugoslavia. They found what they were looking for in Marx's early works. In the 1950s they briefly published a modest journal, *Pogledi*, and by the early 1960s they had built enough momentum to launch a new, farther-ranging journal, aptly named *Praxis*.

Through long, scholarly essays, the «*praxisovci*,» as they were called, used the weapon of philosophy to describe the failings of contemporary socialist society, not only in the Soviet Union, but also, and primarily, in Yugoslavia. *Praxis* was published from 1964 to 1975, in both Yugoslav and international editions. It was remarkable and unprecedented that *Praxis*, as a dissident journal in an ostensibly communist country, was allowed to exist at all for so many years.

Because it used the language of Marxism and embraced the core Yugoslav innovation of workers' self-management, the journal was tolerated by the regime, though at times banned when it got too explicit or out of line. Some *Praxis* theorists, such as **Svetozar Stojanović**, went beyond philosophy in using Marxist theory to criticize the Stalinist political order in much the same terms as Djilas, but with stronger theoretical grounding⁸. And as in many dissident journals in the 19th-century Russian tradition, it was well understood that, using «*Aesopian*» language, the criticism of Stalinism was also implicitly criticism of its legacy in present-day Yugoslavia as well.

The work of the *praxisovci* – intellectual, social, cultural, and political criticism cloaked as philosophy – was not without political impact. The first time the journal was banned was in 1967-68, when the Croatian *praxisovci* contingent wrote passionately critical essays opposing the re-emergence of Croatian nationalism. And in the 1972 student revolt in Belgrade, the Serbian *praxisovci* and their students were directly involved, leading to their persecution and firing from the university. One way of looking at the *Praxis* movement was a deep internal quarrel within the Yugoslav League of Communists itself, with would-be reformers pitted against the hardline insiders who exercised real power. Indeed, it was popularly suspected, not without merit, that some *praxisovci* themselves aspired to political power, which only intensified the communist government's suspicions and discomfort.

Praxis, in turn, became part of the core of the «*Marxist humanism*» movement of the 1960s and 1970s, both in Western and Eastern Europe. Like-minded dissidents who «*turned Marx on his head*» in critiquing the communist regime included **Leszek Kołakowski** and **Adam Schaff** in Poland, **Karel Kosík** in Czechoslovakia, and others. An annual two-week Summer School sponsored by the *Praxis* group on the beautiful Dalmatian island of Korčula⁹ became a focus of the Marxist humanist movement from both East and West.

In the East, Marxist humanist philosophers, by challenging their regimes' Marxist credentials, were influential in paving the way for rebellions against communist and Soviet rule in Eastern Europe. The best example was the 1967 Czechoslovak rebellion, in which Kosík and other humanist heretics (including **Vaclav Havel**) played a critical role before the brutal Soviet invasion.

⁷ Marx himself was ambivalent about the applicability of his theory to the nineteenth-century Russian Empire. At first skeptical of the idea that societies could «*skip*» stages of development, he eventually became more supportive of it as he was persuaded by Plekhanov and other Russian revolutionaries that the Russian mir could become the kernel of communism in Russia. This idealized, romantic agrarian vision of the mir played a relatively minor role in Russia's twentieth-century revolutionary upheaval, though perhaps it made an upside-down comeback of sorts in the Bolshevik notion of collectivization, disastrously culminating in the tragic *holodomor* of 1932-1933.

⁸ See, for example, Svetozar Stojanović, *Between Ideals and Reality*, trans. Gerson S. Sher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁹ It was my good fortune that I had to attend the Korčula Summer School repeatedly to interact with the *Praxis* Marxists as original research for my doctoral dissertation.

The August 1967 Korčula Summer School, focusing on the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, was a major international event. Likewise in Poland, though *Lech Wałęsa* was certainly no Marxist, the fresh air of Marxist criticism brought in the Schaff and Kołakowski, paved the way for increased diversity of opinion and opposition in that country, culminating in the Soviets' imposition of martial law in 1984.

Today, «*Marxist humanism*» has faded as a source of popular inspiration for radical change. It lives on in the critical theory of the German Frankfurt School and a smattering of radical professors elsewhere. Yet in terms of a methodological tool of historical analysis and understanding of modern society, critical historical analysis centered on the class conflict, it continues to have a presence¹⁰. In my own writing on U.S.-Soviet scientific cooperation, I have found aspects of the early Marx's focus on critical analysis and debunking of the reigning myths of the society of his day very useful in contrasting the claims of high-minded people – including diplomats, politicians, and even scientists – on affairs in the «real world». Thus, in my recent book's¹¹ use of the word “critical” in the subtitle of my history of scientific cooperation between the United States and the Soviet Union, both before and after 1991, was quite deliberate. What I sought to show was that scientific cooperation – both the form and the non-scientific rationale (political, cultural, emotional) – between the two superpowers rested perilously on the shifting sands of historical change, that over time the political rationale for the manner and structure of scientific cooperation underwent significant change as the superpower relationship, evolved.

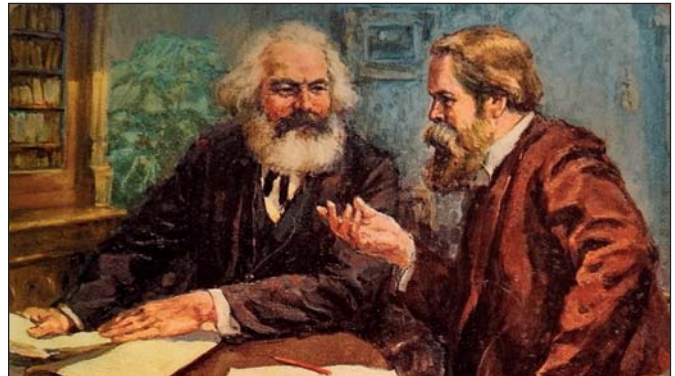
IV.

In this essay, I have attempted to demonstrate, in a way different from, but complementary to, Prof. Kul'chitskiy's analysis, how the «Marxist» ideology of the Soviet Union was turned on its head in a way that would have deeply disturbed Marx himself. What I have sought to illustrate here is that this transformation began well before *Lenin* and the Bolsheviks, perhaps even as early as communism itself morphed from a vision into a movement. In the process, I argue, Marx's critical historical method, resting on an ontology of human praxis-reification-alienation, itself became reified as Marx's framework became an «-ism.» Marx's pithy statement, «*Moi, je ne suis pas Marxiste*», is key, in my view, to understanding the corruption of his work and its evolution into a new state religion after 1917.

I have also tried to help the reader to learn about an alternative, and I think more authentic, interpretation of Marx's work and historical method, which in Eastern Europe was quite influential in stimulating opposition to Soviet oppression, though never taking hold in the Soviet Union itself. I can therefore understand why those who lived in the

former Soviet Union might find it controversial and view it with intense skepticism, given the «other» Marxism's role in causing such great catastrophes in that country and given their isolation from the debates and upheaval going on in Eastern Europe.

In the end, what I believe matters is not so much whether the Soviet system resembled Marx's vision of communism, which it clearly did not, but instead the power of Marx's method of critical historical analysis to identify historically how the reigning paradigms of social thought are manipulated to justify the real world of production, exploitation, and oppression in which people live day to day. To my mind, that dynamic intellectual framework is no less useful in comprehending contemporary society as well.



Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels

All that said, *Marx fell short in two crucial ways*. First, as discussed here, *he failed to anticipate that his theory could become a ruling ideology* to justify some of the worst oppression that the world has ever seen. And secondly, *he failed to consider the visceral, lasting, divisive power of nationalism*¹². Writing in the age of the rise of the nation-state, Marx (and Engels) viewed *nationalism* as a transient phenomenon, which would be surmounted by the worldwide unity of the proletariat. He could not have been more wrong. Marx did not seem to appreciate is the role of culture, including national culture, in slowing down or even reversing social and political change, much less the ever-accelerating pace of technological change – in Marx's terms, the «*means of production*». This tension may go a long way to explaining much in our global crisis today – the revolt of traditional nations against modernism, the worldwide trend toward dictatorship, the challenges of sustaining democracy, and our planetary environmental crisis.

It has been argued, I think persuasively, that Marx's historical method was time-bound in nineteenth-century capitalist society. But as I have tried to show here, its emphasis on critical analysis, of always keeping a focus on the gap «*between ideals and reality*», to paraphrase the Praxis Marxist *Svetozar Stojanović*, is of abiding value. ■

¹⁰ Indeed, famous sociologists, political theorists, and historians of the late 19th century and beyond owed much to Marx's perspective, for example *Max Weber*, *Émile Durkheim*, *C. Wright Mills*, *E. P. Thompson*, *Herbert Marcuse*, and *Barrington Moore*.

¹¹ G. Sher, *From Pugwash to Putin: A Critical History of US-Soviet Scientific Cooperation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019). Translated into Chinese in 2022 by China Science and Technology Press.

¹² If there was one critique of my Praxis book more salient than others, it was my lack of attention to nationalism in Yugoslavia. *Mea culpa*. The Praxis Marxists – Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Bosnians, Macedonians, Montenegrins – came from ethnic groups with strong, clashing identities and in some cases bloody histories of struggle with each other. In their writings, they sharply criticized all forms of nationalism and clung to Marx's cosmopolitan perspective. Yet what I learned only later, and what I should have understood earlier, was that all the while, especially between some in the Belgrade and Zagreb groups, there were strong undercurrents of ethnic dislike and tension. After Tito's death, these rifts emerged even more strongly, with some of the Belgrade colleagues becoming vehement Serbian nationalists who were even complicit in the genocidal «*ethnic cleansing*» in Bosnia