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## Before October: The Unbearable Romanticism of Western Marxism

by Roland Boer

Most Western Marxists suffer from a deep resentment: they have never experienced a successful communist revolution. For some unaccountable reason, all of those successful revolutions have happened in the 'East': Russia, Bulgaria, Romania, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, China, Vietnam and so on. And none of the few revolutions in the 'West', from Finland to Germany, were successful. The only exception, Cuba, proves the rule, for the turning of the Cuban revolution to communism and Russian support happened after the revolution.

The resentment of Western Marxists against the successful Eastern revolutions manifests itself in a complex mix of dismissal and unbearable romanticism. As for the latter, it appears in the position that the perfect revolution is yet to come, that it will happen at an undefinable utopian moment in the future. The criteria for what constitutes such a romantic moment constantly shift, depending on which position one takes, but they all remain in the future, have not yet been realised, offer as yet unimaginable qualitative change and certainly don't need an army. Needless to say, all of the successful Eastern revolutions fail the test, for they inevitably came to grief, were betrayed, fell from grace, turned away from romantic revolutionary ideals. In short, they 'failed'. And the code word for such 'failure' is Stalin. As soon as a revolution becomes 'Stalinist' -- as they all did according to Western Marxists -- then it was not a true revolution after all. The seeds of that failure were already embodied in the moment of revolution itself.

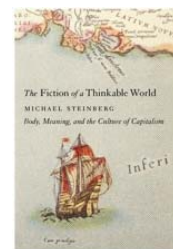
I would like to address this revolutionary romanticism at three levels, one concerning a recent incident in relation to China, another dealing with a curious argument concerning Norway and a third by considering what may be termed 'fall' narratives in relation to the first successful communist revolution, namely, the Russian Revolution.

### Chinese Communism

Through increasing visits to China, to teach, travel and engage in endless discussions with Marxists, I have found most of my preconceptions thoroughly dismissed and utterly complexified.

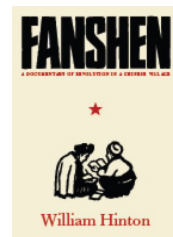
Slowly, I began to share the sense of my Chinese interlocutors that Western Marxist engagements with China were wanting in sophistication. So I contacted the organisers of an energetic annual conference, a vibrant journal and book series -- **Historical Materialism**. The idea was to arrange for a panel or two on 'Communism in China Today' at a couple of conferences. We would gather some Chinese experts who would engage in detailed debate concerning Marxism in China.

The response was disappointing and predictable: 'Is China really communist anymore?' 'Are there any Marxists left in China?' 'If so,

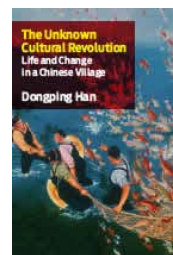


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they do not know what they are talking about'. 'What about freedom, democracy, workers?' To the suggestion of a conference panel I received a flat 'no', dismissing Marxism in China as at least unsophisticated, if not having betrayed some impossible ideal. I had thought the *Historical Materialism* people would be more open to a vigorous debate, one that explored issues in a manner that would move past such preconceptions. Yet, this response was also predictable, for I have encountered similar responses from one Western Marxist after another: China is not really communist, so it is not worth considering. Sometimes my interlocutor will suggest that China is 'evil', that it is out for world domination, that we need to fear the Chinese Empire. If I press further, my interlocutor will refer to an article in the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* or another Western newspaper as 'evidence'. And if I refer to a Chinese source, it is dismissed as tainted or unreliable. On such matters, these Western Marxists are no different from bourgeois critics of China.

### Norway's Bourgeois Socialism

The second example is even more astonishing.<sup>1</sup> According to some sources in Norway, the country has achieved socialism without a revolution. Forget those messy and 'failed' revolutions in the East; in Norway socialism has arrived by peaceful means. The argument may best be described in terms of the following propositions:

The bourgeoisie is absolutely dominant.

It is firmly on the left.

It supports the Norwegian welfare state.

The working class has largely been dismantled, since all its wishes have been met.

The remnant of the working class is firmly right-wing.

The conclusion: Norway is a socialist country.

How might we make sense of these contradictory statements? Let us grant this argument for a moment. That would mean Norway has managed to achieve socialism via a non-revolutionary path.

That is, the country is a manifestation of the argument of Bernstein (among the German Social-Democrats at the end of the nineteenth) in which all one needs to do is persuade the bourgeoisie of the benefits of socialism and that class will see the light. At the time, Bernstein soon found himself outside the socialist movement, but perhaps his moment has come -- if we are to believe this argument.

Now, I can affirm that Norway is probably one of the most bourgeois places you may visit, an example of the pervasive success of the bourgeois project. The problem is that what passes for 'socialism' in the minds of some of its inhabitants is actually good old liberalism in its authentic expression (which leads one to advocate feminism, gays, immigrants etc). So I am left with the question: is Norway really a case of the Bernsteinian exception, so much so that it is an exception to the rest of the world, achieving what can only be a 'chardonnay socialist' state? Of course not, for it is another manifestation of the resentment against the successful revolutions of the East, arguing now that the perfect, Western revolution has really happened, paradoxically without a communist revolution.

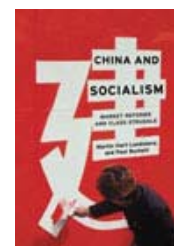
### The Russian Revolution: A 'Fall' Narrative



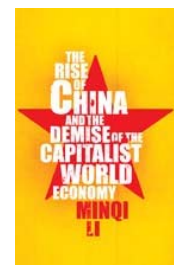
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The third instance of unbearable romanticism is manifested in what I call 'fall' narratives. By a fall narrative I refer to the story in Genesis 2-3, in which Eve and then Adam eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree (of the knowledge of good and evil) and are thereby banished by God from paradise. This narrative is unwittingly deployed by Western (not even necessarily Marxist) analysts of Eastern revolutions. I take as my example the first successful communism revolution in Russia.

According to these Western analysts, when did the betrayal or fall take place? The least generous suggest that it happened even before the revolution, especially through Lenin's supposedly devious machinations and his refusal to cooperate with other socialist groups such as the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries (both Left and Right wings). An example of this approach may be found in Bruce Lincoln's two massive works, *Passage through Armageddon* and *Red Victory*.<sup>2</sup> The second book ends with a section called 'the revolution consumes its makers', where the rise of Stalin constitutes the final 'travesty' of the revolution. Yet the conditions for that fall were also established in what Lincoln insists calling a 'civil' war (despite 160,000 troops from the USA, UK, Greece, Italy, Japan, Germany, Austria, France and Turkey, along with endless equipment, money and logistics support for the White Armies), if not beforehand in the very nature of communism. For Lincoln, communism by its very nature leads to such betrayal. He shows his true colours in his sympathies for the last stand of the White Army in Crimea under Wrangel. This aristocrat was, argues Lincoln, a good tactician and organiser, supposedly trying to ensure a just regime. After his defeat, the departure of about 150,000 whites from Crimea is recounted with a sense of loss.

More often, for Western Marxists at least, the moment of the fall is the October Revolution itself, if not immediately afterwards. From that moment -- to give a few of the many formulations -- the party and even the working class disintegrate; the Bolsheviks become 'renegades'; Lenin's thought loses its coherence; his 'heroic narrative' of a victorious working-class socialist revolution begins to come apart; bureaucracy becomes pervasive; a transformation takes place from a flexible, democratic and open party to one of the most centralised and 'authoritarian' political organisations in modern history; the dictatorship of the proletariat becomes the dictatorship of the secretariat; the revolution shifts from being a revolution from below to one from above; the democratic soviets crumble before a centralised and dictatorial party.<sup>3</sup> The problem with such fall narratives is that they tend to be theological (a fall from paradise) and fail to deal with the complex messiness of history.<sup>4</sup> They also assume, as Tamara Prosic has pointed out,<sup>5</sup> that communists are perfect human beings who should not 'sin'. And they neglect Lenin's repeated point that the revolution itself is easy; far more complex is the construction of communism itself. The result is that even the most sympathetic Marxists prefer the time before October, before the moment of the revolution itself when the Bolsheviks, with massive support, seized power.

Some lament the lost opportunities, suggesting that a broad, cross-party socialist government, such as the one established in the February Revolution, was the ideal.<sup>6</sup> Others may actually allow that the brief time after the revolution was valid, but that the 'civil' war corroded all the gains, for it was a period of centralised control, tough measures, the Cheka and 'war communism', all of which



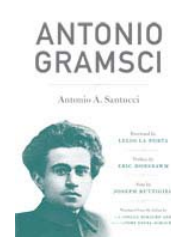
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betrayed the revolution.<sup>7</sup> A solution for some is to side with Trotsky, arguing that if he had won out over Stalin, the situation would have been far different. This is a classic example of a futile 'what if' narrative.

All of them are fall narratives, accounts of betrayal of the communist revolution. Far better, then, to focus on the period before October, since that is where Western Marxists perpetually find themselves.

As for me, I prefer the time after October. Why? It is a story of the astonishing survival and success of the revolution against crushing odds. In Russia, the widespread sense was that the new Soviet government would collapse within a matter of days. At the moment of the revolution, the situation was desperate after three years of war with Germany and Austria -- in terms of food, fuel for heat, transport, industrial production, along with the spontaneous demobilisation of the army. It became worse after the revolution, with an economic blockade from the rest of the world and another four years of 'civil' war in the north, east and south: Denikin, Kolchak, Iudenich, Wrangel led various White Armies, even declaring new states in the territories they conquered. The Poles added a front in the west, rendering the new Soviet state a mere rump of what it was to become. All of them were enthusiastically supported by capitalist powers hostile to the Soviets, in terms of troops, money, equipment and advice. As the contemporary account of Ransome shows so well, the Russians knew they had to overcome this devastation without assistance from outside.<sup>8</sup> Yet, through sheer guts, determination and resourcefulness, the communists were successful.

One does not need to refer to the new archival material<sup>9</sup> to gain a sense of both how desperate the situation was and how stunning was the victory of the Red Army and thereby the communist revolution against overwhelming forces. One merely needs to read Lenin's voluminous writings at the time -- his texts, talks, telegrams and telephone conversations make it quite clear that it was touch and go for a quite a while.<sup>10</sup> But all this is of no interest for romantic Western Marxists, for it merely shows how the revolution fell from grace.

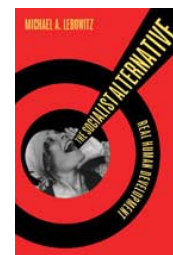
**1** The following section comes from a conversation with a Norwegian intellectual.

**2** W. Bruce Lincoln, *Passage through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution 1914-1918* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1986), W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

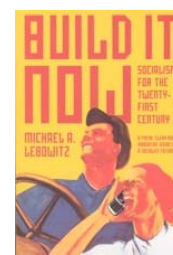
**3** Moira Donald, *Marxism and Revolution: Karl Kautsky and the Russian Marxists, 1900-1924* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 221-46, Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2009), vol. 2, pp. 283-328, Lars T. Lih, *Lenin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2011), Tony Cliff, *Lenin 1917-1923: The Revolution Besieged* (London: Bookmarks, 1987), Theodore H. von Laue, *Why Lenin? Why Stalin? A Reappraisal of the Russian Revolution, 1900-1930* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), Oskar Anweiler, *The Soviets: The Russian Worker, Peasants, and Soldiers Councils, 1905-1921* (New York: Pantheon, 1974 [1958]).

**4** Roland Boer, *In the Vale of Tears: On Marxism and Theology V*, Historical Materialism Book Series (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

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5 Personal communication.

6 Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

7 Cliff, *Lenin 1917-1923: The Revolution Besieged*.

8 Arthur Ransome, *The Crisis in Russia* (New York: Dodo, 2011 [1921]).

9 Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks in Power: The First Year of Soviet Rule in Petrograd*.

10 V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 47 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1960), vols. 23, 26-33, 36, 42.

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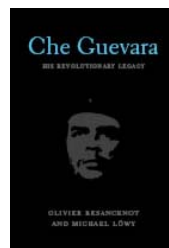
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