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Part I

Introduction to Part I

Marxism's future, like its present, depends, more than anything else, on the ambient political culture in which it exists. At the same time, today's political culture has been shaped, in part, by Marxism's past. I will not attempt to untangle this complex web of causal interactions; it would be an impossible task. But, as a prelude to a more focused account of aspects of Marxism's history that bear on the prospects for Marxism's future, and on the role Althusserian and analytical Marxism might play in it, it will be useful to begin with a few reflections on where we now are and where we seem to be going. Because Marxism is presently in near total eclipse, I will not have much to say about the state of Marxism today. But I will venture some remarks on the larger situation in which its present is implicated. Here, then, are some thoughts on the exhaustion of political imagination in our time; its implications for real-world politics; and on signs that, once again, the world is changing – to an uncertain situation, rife with danger, but with enhanced opportunities for renewing socialist theory and practice. The impressions I will convey pertain most directly to the United States. But they are not, for that reason, misleadingly parochial. It is part of the story of our time that the one remaining superpower is rapidly making the world over in its image.

Needless to say, it is too soon to put the present in anything like a definitive perspective. But the broad outlines of an account are already becoming clear. Thus it is fair to say that, in the last years of the old millennium, political imagination was everywhere in decline and, along with it, the idea that the political institutions of the West could be improved upon fundamentally. This was a massive and sudden development, more remarkable even than Marxism's own precipitous fall. It was also a situation that called for remediation, if for no other reason than that it fed complacency and degraded political life. In the first years of the twenty-first century, the effects of this transformation of the political culture are increasingly felt. Blowback from ill-conceived imperialist ventures and the realities of corporate globalizations are ever more salient; desperation is everywhere on the rise. The world is therefore in for turbulent times ahead. But, as before in human history, the pendulum will surely swing back – provided, of course, that unspeakable catastrophes are

averted. Big changes are already under way. Political imagination is stirring. The world seems a more dangerous place than it was just a few years ago. But it is also less complacent. Resistance is increasing and, with it, the possibility that progressive forces will emerge strengthened. This is why the time is ripe to press forward. To seize the moment, though, we must first take stock of the situation at hand.

* * *

In the economically developed and liberal democratic West, the exhaustion of political imagination is palpable mainly in retrospect. This is as true for those of us who have lived through the entire sea change as it is for those who have come on board more recently. Until the outbreak of the so-called 'war on terrorism',¹ great events, like wars or revolutions, hardly affected the lives of people in the West. Even the fall of communism and the disaggregation of the Third World had hardly any effect on lived experience. These mutations on the world scene may help to explain the political metamorphoses of recent years. But they have not registered as discontinuities in the lives of most inhabitants of the developed and stable liberal democracies. They resonate, if at all, not with a bang but a whimper, perceived from afar. If, as some claim, history ended with the triumph of Western institutions, one would have to say that it did so discreetly, without calling attention to itself.²

The banality of political life in our time is especially evident in the United States, where electoral contests have come to resemble advertising promotions for nearly indistinguishable products, and where everyone knows that, whoever wins elections, more or less the same corporate interests will continue to rule. Remarkably, this fact is accepted with indifference or jaded annoyance, not outrage. Who would have predicted, a quarter century ago, that politics would become so insipid so rapidly, and that people in motion at the time would react by retreating into private life! The generation that came of age politically in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the generation that now controls what used to be called 'the commanding heights' of the state, the economy, and civil society, was thought to have rejected the apathy emblematic of the generation that preceded it.³ This was what 'the New Left' was supposed to be about. But now, as 'baby boomers' age, apathy reigns in the public arena again, and baby boomers are leading the way.

There are exceptions, of course. There are still unreconstructed leftists from that generation and earlier ones, and hosts of younger militants as well. But thanks to the exhaustion of political imagination, the ever growing numbers of people who are again coming together 'to change life' must not only reinvent the wheel; they must do so in the face of what sometimes seems to be an almost insurmountable inertia. Militants today know, as well as anyone ever did, how to organize and maneuver at a tactical level. They know what to mobilize *against*. But, with political imagination becoming ever more degraded year after year, it is less clear than it has ever been what to mobilize *for*. This uncertainty is increasingly debilitating as new political movements develop and expand.

In much the way that, according to the conventional wisdom, the good side of Marxism has been absorbed into mainstream thinking, while the rest, the 'nonsense' that once seemed important, has been rightfully cast aside, there are 'progressives' today who think that all Left initiatives worth retaining have already taken root in the political culture; and therefore that the Left, or at least the New Left, is the victim, not of a failure of imagination, but of its own success. What they have in mind is the preeminence now accorded in the political sphere to cultural issues, including questions of 'identity' and 'inclusiveness'. There is some truth in this contention. But the victories of the New Left, such as they were, were won at a tremendous price. The causes advanced by the social movements that emerged under the aegis of New Left politics had first to be deradicalized and even depoliticized before they were welcomed into the mainstream. Once there, they have been put to use further depoliticizing the political sphere. In the United States, this process is, by now, so complete that cultural themes, broadly construed, have come to define the terms in which differences register in mainstream politics. Republicans and Democrats part ways, to the degree that they still do, along these lines. It is as if the old axes of political contestation, questions of economic power and ultimately of class struggle, no longer matter. In the electoral arena especially, these issues are seldom in dispute. How could it be otherwise when the same monied interests control both parties!

For the political class or, rather, for those in the academy and the media who rationalize their situation, the reigning idea is not exactly that an 'age of ideology' is over; that the old oppositions have faded in the face of an emerging consensus that integrates formerly contending parties. That was the view of some former leftists decades

ago.⁴ They evidently felt a need to defend their turn away from radical politics. It seems that no comparable need is felt by former activists of the New Left. The view today is just that radicalism lost, and that on the whole, it was a good thing that it did – because Western, liberal institutions beat all rivals on all counts, and because the economic system that has matured under their auspices has provided a degree of prosperity that would have been unthinkable had a more radical vision prevailed. This is why many erstwhile New Leftists, when they think about it at all, look back on their youthful enthusiasms with a certain nostalgia for the idealism of the time, but without regret for a political venture that went awry.

One clear consequence of the exhaustion of political imagination over the past quarter century has been a sharp shift of the political mainstream to the right. In this regard too, the American case is exemplary. Not long ago, in the United States, liberalism was the order of the day. The political settlements of the Roosevelt and Truman eras were firmly in place. Lyndon Johnson's Great Society even promised a renaissance of New Deal liberalism, one that would at last address problems of institutional racism and other consequences of slavery and white America's near annihilation of indigenous peoples. The Great Society became a casualty of the Vietnam War. But, at the time and for a few years thereafter, it seemed that American liberalism, still in command, was becoming more like European social democracy in its post-World War II phase. The difference was just that the American version lacked the historical connection to socialism that was part of social democracy's heritage. Not unrelatedly, American liberals also had weaker ties to the labor movement than their social democratic or laborite counterparts. Therefore, their politics was, on the whole, more business friendly than theirs and their self-representations were generally less visionary than was commonplace in European social democratic parties or in the British Labour Party. Even so, the general drift of American liberalism and therefore of mainstream politics in the United States was of a piece with social democracy elsewhere. The idea that affirmative state programs should play a predominant role in insuring economic well-being and in rectifying social problems seemed well entrenched and beyond serious dispute.

It was only at the fringes of the political culture that anyone thought otherwise. In the United States, there had long existed a dedicated minority intent on dismantling the New Deal. In 1964, with the nomination of Barry Goldwater for president, they seized

control of the Republican Party. But after the resounding defeat of Goldwater's presidential bid, liberal dominance appeared more secure than it had ever been. The economic and social policies that were in place before the Roosevelt presidency, the old neoliberal regime the Goldwaterites favored, appeared to have fallen irreversibly into 'the ashbin of history', much as Marxism seems to have done today.

How things have changed! Today the ideas of that defeated fringe are even more hegemonic than New Deal and Great Society liberalism formerly were. And the dismantling of the vestiges of that earlier orthodoxy, and of bolder social democratic initiatives in countries with more vibrant political traditions, has been carried out with zest and efficacy by political leaders drawn from the generation that produced the New Left. Goldwater's politics has succeeded on a world scale beyond the imaginings of its most ardent proponents decades ago. It has taken over the political common sense of our time – to such an extent that it even informs the thinking of those who still call themselves liberals or, more often, proponents of a 'Third Way'. It is of some interest to observe that many of the principal exponents of these ostensibly new political orientations, the real undoers of liberalism and social democracy, cut their teeth politically on the fringes of the New Left and even, in a few conspicuous European cases, at its core.

Since the account I will give of Marxism's future focuses mainly on philosophical departures within Marxism and on related developments in political theory, it bears notice too that a largely unacknowledged but equally remarkable transformation is evident from the professional vantage point of academic political philosophy. The change there has been more complex than in the larger political culture, and considerably more equivocal. On the one hand, in the past quarter century, political philosophy, especially in the English-speaking world, has insulated itself with great success from the real world of politics. In fact, for reasons peculiar to its own internal dynamic, it has proceeded on a somewhat different course from the prevailing political culture. But, viewed in retrospect, no matter how apolitical and even contrary-minded mainstream political philosophy has become, it too reflects the zeitgeist. A profound diminution of political imagination is evident even in this domain. But because it has divorced itself so effectively from ongoing political affairs, because its trajectory has been, to some degree, internally generated, and because it remains connected to earlier,

more vibrant, moments in the history of political thought, academic political philosophy today provides conceptual resources indispensable for those militants, already in motion, whose need for a revival of political imagination has become acute.

* * *

Perhaps the most telling indicator of the nature of politics in our time has been the virtual disappearance of an organized Left. I will use *Left* and *Right*, as I have to this point, to describe the political orientations these terms have designated, loosely but unmistakably, since that moment in revolutionary France, more than two centuries ago, when the more radical delegates to the National Assembly seated themselves to the left of the presiding officer. It is fortuitous that this usage stuck because it introduces a useful ambiguity into descriptions of political orientations. It is ambiguous because *left* and *right* are relational concepts; *left* is defined in contrast to *right*, and vice versa. Strictly speaking, therefore, these terms have no fixed meaning. Political parties and social movements that everyone understands to be on the Left have their own left and right wings, as do movements and parties of the Right. Here, however, except when otherwise indicated, I will use these terms to designate positions on an idealized political spectrum. Until recently, these notions were inscribed in the 'collective consciousness' of nearly everyone who thought about political affairs. In recent years, however, along with the exhaustion of political imagination and largely in consequence of it, the idea has been floated that the longstanding division between Left and Right has somehow become obsolete. I would venture that this thought is itself an effect of the rightward drift of mainstream politics. In what follows, I will, in any case, assume that claims for the irrelevancy of the notions of Left and Right are without merit. The problem today is not that Left and Right no longer have any meaning. It is that there is hardly any Left left.

It is also commonplace to use the term *Center* in reference to this idealized political spectrum. This usage can be misleading, however, because, in politics, the Center is not exactly a 'midpoint' between the Left and the Right. As a rough approximation, though, and in accordance with conventional understandings, it is fair to think of the Center that way, at least for now. In speaking of the virtual disappearance of the Left, then, I mean that those political formations that traditionally comprised the Left no longer stand on the left end

of that idealized spectrum – that they have moved to the center or even the right, even when, as is often the case, they acknowledge a continuous historical connection with their pasts. To cite a pale example, the Democratic Party in the United States has been understood, at least since the Roosevelt era, to be, if not exactly a party of the Left, then the closest approximation of one that mainstream political life in the United States provided. But, on the idealized Left–Right spectrum that defines political orientations, the Democratic Party, whatever it may once have been, nowadays is, at most, a party of the Center or Center-Right, with a small and increasingly marginalized left wing. Much the same is true of political parties in other countries that, more plainly than the Democratic Party, genuinely did once belong to the Left.

* * *

It is instructive to use a medical analogy to describe the situation we are in. In dealing with illnesses, it is customary, first, to identify symptoms, then to diagnose a disease, and only at that point, finally, to look for an explanation that can facilitate a cure. So far, I have called attention to a few important symptoms. In real medical contexts, it is often possible to abbreviate this step or to eliminate it altogether because it is seldom necessary to establish that a patient is ill. But with political imagination depleted, our sensibilities have become, as it were, so run down that it is difficult to see that there is a problem at all, much less a debilitating condition from which public life suffers. It is as if having lived for a long time with a chronic ailment, we have come to think that this is the way that life must be, and no longer notice our distress. Hence the need to establish that the political culture is sick. This is the first step towards arriving at a diagnosis and ultimately an explanation illuminating enough to suggest a remedy. To continue this analogy, good diagnoses reveal how disparate symptoms hang together, how they indicate the presence of a single underlying disease. In this respect, the condition that afflicts our political life runs true to form. Just as a well-defined disease can have many distinct and overlapping causes, a whole panoply of factors have no doubt joined together, each in its own way, to bring about the current state of affairs. But what is crucial is the common thread that runs through the symptoms. This is what suggests a common diagnosis and therefore a single disease; one that may indeed be amenable to a cure.

That thread, I submit, is a loss of faith in progress or, more precisely, in a better world that differs in kind, not just degree, from our own. It was an idea of progress sufficiently broad to encompass a notion of radical, not just incremental, change that motivated the political orientation of the historical Left – especially, but not only, its socialist wing. Without such an idea in the background or, better still, at the forefront of political thought, the Left, if it survives at all, can only devolve into a motley of good causes, bereft of any guiding vision or indeed of any unifying principle whatsoever. We will find that, for no compelling reason, a defensible rational intuition, sustaining that notion of progress, has been set aside – apparently in consequence of perceived flaws in efforts to give it theoretical expression. But there was never any need to take such a step. Quite the contrary. Socialist theory, or at least the version of it that emerges in those new departures in Marxist philosophy that appear, from today's vantage point, to have sealed Marxism's fate, provides ample resources for vindicating faith in the possibility of a genuinely better – and fundamentally different – social, political and economic order.

Nevertheless, it is likely that observers looking back on this period will conclude that a loss of faith in progress was a conspicuous feature of the spirit of the time, perhaps the most conspicuous feature. It is a theme played out repeatedly in the work of culture critics, literary scholars, and public intellectuals. So-called postmodernists, especially, are quick to advance the idea that there are no 'master narratives' in human history and therefore no defensible notions of human progress. I will not take on this murky but still fashionable *fin de siècle* form of 'discourse' here – partly because I think that the trouble required to make postmodernist claims clear enough to engage polemically is not worth the effort, and partly because it is unnecessary. The idea that historical narratives and therefore notions of qualitative progress are neither true nor false, but only better or worse for some social groups, is best refuted by showing how sense can be made of the ideas postmodernists reject. This form of indirect rebuttal will be a recurrent, albeit tacit, theme throughout the chapters that follow.

But it is not only, or even mainly, postmodernists who have come to the conclusion that there are no ways of organizing basic social, political and economic institutions that are both better and radically different from liberal democratic and capitalist ways. For want of imagination, this view of the human prospect has come to be

assumed by almost everyone. From this imaginative deficit, it follows, if not quite with logical necessity then very nearly so, that the idea of a qualitatively better way of organizing human affairs is an illusion in the Freudian sense, an expression of a wish generated by an (unconscious) desire, irrespective of its relation to reality.⁵ The next step is to conclude that it is wise to forbear from attempting to realize alternative social visions and even from seriously entertaining the thought that they might constitute feasible human possibilities. So long as the present condition is bearable, why even think of changing it fundamentally, if there is no reason to believe that *any* contemplated structural transformation can change the human prospect for the better? On this view, the very idea of radical change is utopian; and utopian thinking, the argument goes, is a great and constant danger. It was responsible, in part, for the crimes perpetrated in the name and for the sake of communism. The utopian temptation must therefore be exorcized. In the present historical period, this position has become the consensus view among academics and public intellectuals. This is why our distinctively contemporary political ailment could be described as a fear – rationalized by a few, presumed by the vast majority – of utopian thinking. Facetiously but correctly, it might be called *utopiaphobia*, the irrational fear of contemplating radically different and ostensibly better ways of organizing human affairs. No doubt, there is good reason to be wary of utopian thinking in some, perhaps even most, circumstances. But not in all, and not now. A realistic utopianism is a remedy, perhaps the only one available, for the exhaustion of political imagination in our time. And if, as many believe, history is approaching another of its infrequent watersheds – whether because the one remaining superpower will sooner or later overestimate its ability to control events, to the detriment of global political stability; or because capitalism itself is entering into a debilitating structural crisis; or for any of a panoply of other reasons, separately or in conjunction – what was utopian yesterday may not be so tomorrow.

* * *

Before faith in progress lapsed, the Left had a unified project. To focus just on Marxism – the most important and influential case, and the one that will occupy our attention here – it was always assumed that there was an integral link between its vision of a radically better way to organize human affairs and its account of

how to get from where we now are to that desired end. According to the Marxist account, the agent of fundamental social change in this historical epoch, the bearer of new and better social relations, was the proletariat, the principal part of 'the wretched of the earth'. Thus support for the 'utopian' vision Marx advanced implied support for a theory of social agency which implied support, in turn, for the proletariat and, by extension, for other downtrodden groups. That vision and its corresponding theory of history and social change are therefore partisan to their core. In its theory as well as its practice, Marxism sided with the wretched of the earth against their oppressors.

But without anything like the unifying vision that motivated the Marxist project, all that remains, for those who are similarly intent on fighting oppression, is their identification with the interests of subordinate groups. This has become the position assumed by the successors of the historical Left. But nothing any longer underwrites the generosity of spirit they continue to evince. Struggles against corporate domination, environmental degradation, and racial and sexual oppression go on. If anything, the pace and intensity of these struggles is increasing. But even heroic efforts to combat these scourges are bound to remain diffuse, reactive and, in most cases, ineffectual, if they are not grounded in a rationally compelling theory and practice. Otherwise, good will alone is left. This is estimable, but it is not enough. Thus the longstanding and honorable determination 'to build a new world on the ashes of the old', a world that fully incorporates the wretched of the earth on principles of liberty, equality and fraternity, has given way to a diffuse dedication to side with those who were formerly held to be the builders of that new order, but who are now thought of only as victims of a basically unchangeable regime. How could it be otherwise when it is taken for granted that it is folly to want to change the system itself fundamentally for the better!

Utopiaphobia not only diminishes Left politics; it is also self-defeating. It leads to the permanent stagnation of those genuinely progressive impulses that refuse to die because they are continually reborn by the experience of daily life. It is one thing, after all, to be a self-conscious maker of history, and something else to be a victim of a system that is, at root, beyond fundamental repair. Thus progressive forces are caught in a vicious circle in which a sense of permanent and unalterable victimhood spawns the conviction that the system is unchangeable, and vice versa. It is therefore no surprise

that the prospect of fundamental change has dropped away even from the thinking of those generous and well-intentioned souls for whom nearly everyone who is not healthy, wealthy, white, heterosexual and male – in other words, the vast majority of the world's population – is an object of concern. Without a vision of a better end in view, the most one can reasonably demand on their behalf – and, more importantly, the most they can reasonably demand for themselves – is indemnification for their condition and inclusion into the regime that has generated it. The consequence is plain. What was once a struggle in and over social, political and economic institutions has devolved into a well-meaning but futile promotion of an inauthentic, coerced civility that threatens no entrenched economic interests and that 'enlightened' establishments are therefore all too happy to accommodate.

If this situation is ever to be rectified, it is crucial that the long march on which Marx embarked be resumed. I submit that Althusserian and especially analytical Marxism pointed the way forward; and that continuing what they began is a way to breathe new life into that democratic and secular notion of progress that animated the historical Left, and that supplied the generosity and dedication of its various constituencies with unity and purpose. Perhaps, if circumstances change and interest in Marxism revives, they can serve as a basis for a new Marxist renaissance. There is no sounder basis at hand. But if, in consequence of its historical associations, 'Marxist' remains a category in disrepute, these recent departures in Marxist philosophy, 'translated' into another idiom, can still serve as points of departure for renewing socialist theory. The pages that follow elaborate on these contentions and their implications.

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