

Chapter Five

The Crisis of Socialism

Marxism and waiting for Godot

First formulated in the mid-nineteenth century, classical Marxist socialism made two related pairs of claims, one pair economic and one pair moral. Economically, it argued that capitalism was driven by a logic of competitive exploitation that would cause its eventual collapse; socialism's communal form of production, by contrast, would prove to be economically superior. Morally, it argued, capitalism was evil both because of the self-interested motives of those engaged in capitalist competition and because of the exploitation and alienation that competition caused; socialism, by contrast, would be based on selfless sacrifice and communal sharing.

The initial hopes of Marxist socialists centered on capitalism's internal economic contradictions. The contradictions, they thought, would manifest themselves in increasing class conflict. As the competition for resources heated up, the capitalists' exploitation of the proletariat would necessarily increase. As the exploitation

increased, the proletariat would come to realize its alienation and oppression. At some point, the exploited proletariat would decide that it was not going to take it any more and revolution would ensue. So the strategy of the Marxist intellectuals was to wait and mount a lookout for signs that capitalism's contradictions were leading logically and inexorably to revolution.

They waited a long time. By the early part of the twentieth century, after several failed predictions of imminent revolution, not only was it becoming embarrassing to make further predictions, it was beginning to seem that capitalism was developing in a direction opposite to the way that Marxism said it should be developing.

Three failed predictions

Marxism was and is a class analysis, pitting economic classes against each other in a zero-sum competition. In that competition, the stronger parties would win each successive round of competition, forcing the weaker parties into more desperate straits. Successive rounds of capitalist competition would also pit the stronger parties against each other, yielding more winners and losers, until capitalism generated an economic social structure characterized by a few capitalists at the top and in control of the society's economic resources while the rest of society was pushed into poverty. Even capitalism's nascent middle class would not remain stable, for the logic of zero-sum competition would squeeze a few of the middle class into the top capitalist class and the rest into the proletariat.

This class analysis yielded three definite predictions. First, it predicted that the proletariat would both increase as a percentage of the population and become poorer: as capitalist competition progressed, more and more people would be forced to sell their labor; and as the supply of those selling their labor increased, the wages they could demand would necessarily decrease. Second, it

predicted that the middle class would decrease to a very small percentage of the population: zero-sum competition means there are winners and losers, and while a few would consistently be winners and thus become rich capitalists, most would lose at some point and be forced into the proletariat. Third, it predicted that the capitalists would also decrease as a percentage of the population: zero-sum competition also applies to competition among the capitalists, generating a few consistent winners in control of everything while the rest would be forced down the economic ladder.

Yet that was not how it worked out. By the early twentieth century it seemed that all three of the predictions failed to characterize the development of the capitalist countries. The class of manual laborers had both declined as a percentage of the population and become relatively better off. And the middle class had grown substantially both as a percentage of the population and in wealth, as had the upper class.

Marxist socialism thus faced a set of theoretical problems: Why had the predictions not come to pass? Even more pressing was the practical problem of impatience: If the proletarian masses were the material of revolution, why were they not revolting? The exploitation and alienation *had* to be there—despite surface appearances—and it had to be being felt by capitalism’s victims, the proletariat. So what was to be done about the decidedly non-revolutionary working class? After decades of waiting hopefully and pouncing on any sign of worker dissatisfaction and unrest, the plain fact was that the proletariat was not going to revolt any time soon.

Consequently, the waiting strategy needed to be rethought.¹

¹ Werner Sombart, a Marxist early in his career, was among the first to rethink: “It had to be admitted in the end that Marx had made mistakes on many points of importance” (1896, 87).

Chart 5.1: Marxism on the Logic of Capitalism
"The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer"

<i>Class</i>	Working	Middle	Upper
<i>Initial Status</i>	Weak, poor	Comfortable but unstable	Powerful, rich
<i>Initial Result</i>	Exploited	Fall into working class or climb to upper class	Exploiting, Ruthless
<i>Prediction for the Future</i>	Population percentage increases; Workers poor and revolutionary	Population percentage decreases to zero	Population percentage decreases
<i>Actual Results</i>	Population percentage decreases; Workers comfortable/complacent	Population percentage increases	Population percentage increases

Socialism needs an aristocracy

Many theorists had the same thought. Among the earliest were the Fabians in England, led by Beatrice and Sidney Webb and given name-recognition by George Bernard Shaw. With typical English politeness, the Fabians had decided to abandon all that unpleasant talk of revolution and to pursue socialism by evolution—by meetings, discussions, pamphlets, and voting. Yet the Fabians also decided early to abandon the strategy of waiting for the proletariat

to change society from the bottom-up. That approach, they argued, requires much too much confidence in the powers of the ordinary working man. As Beatrice Webb put it in her memoirs, “we have little faith in the ‘average sensual man’, we do not believe that he can do much more than describe his grievances, we do not think he can prescribe the remedies.”² For both the prescribed remedies and the initiation of measures to enact them, strong leadership by an elite was essential.

In Russia before the revolution of 1917, Lenin had also modified Marxist theory in the same direction in order to make it applicable to the Russian context. Russians certainly had a lot of grievances, but those suffering most were not doing much about them, seeming to accept stolidly that such was their fated lot in life. And it was hard to blame capitalism for their grievances, given that Russia was still a stronghold of feudalism. Lenin did have an explanation for why the proletariat in the capitalist nations of the West were not revolting under their yoke of oppression and alienation—the Western capitalists had cleverly exported that misery to the poorer, undeveloped nations³—but that was not going to help matters in Russia. According to classical Marxism, waiting for socialism to come to Russia meant waiting for capitalism to come to Russia, for capitalism then to develop an industrial proletariat, for the proletariat then to achieve a collective class consciousness and then revolt against the oppressor. That would take a maddeningly long time. So Marx’s theory had to be altered. Socialism in Russia could not wait to develop out of mature capitalism. The revolution would have to take Russia directly from feudalism to socialism. But without capitalism’s organized proletariat, the transition would require an elite who would, through force of will and political violence, effect a “revolution from above”

² Webb 1948, 120.

³ Lenin 1916.

and then impose socialism on everyone in a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”⁴

In China, similar conclusions were reached by Mao Zedong in the 1920s. Mao had been inspired by the results of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917—Russia, Mao then wrote, was now “the number one civilized country in the world”⁵—but he was also unimpressed with the results of his and other communists’ efforts to educate and organize the Chinese peasantry. So Mao had also decided that socialism would have to arise directly out of feudalism. Compared to Russia, China had even less mass political consciousness. Consequently, Mao believed that while the peasantry had a role to play in making the revolution happen, a strong, elite leadership was essential.⁶ Mao introduced two other variations that Lenin did not. The classical Marxist vision of socialism included a developed industrial and technological economy, one that would come about and be maintained by the forces of (dialectical) logic. Mao de-emphasized technology and rationality: Chinese socialism would be more agrarian and low-tech, and it would be brought about less by logic and reason than by sheer, unpredictable will and assertion.

Returning to the European context of the 1920s, the need for strong leadership was confirmed to most radicals by the impotence of the German Social Democrats. Then the leading socialist party in the world and in control of Germany’s government for most of the decade, the Social Democrats proved incapable of accomplishing anything. To Georg Lukács and to Max Horkheimer and the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School, this also pointed up the need for a modification of classical Marxist theory.⁷ Left to their own devices,

⁴ Lenin 1917, 177-78; Lenin 1902. See also Service (2000, 98) for Pëtr Tkachëv’s influence on Lenin on these points. Also Lenin: “The history of all countries shows that the working class exclusively by its own efforts is able to develop only trade union consciousness.”

⁵ In Spence 1999, 40.

⁶ Spence 1999, 17-19, 46-47.

⁷ Lukács 1923; Horkheimer 1927.

the proletariat and their spokesmen would simply wallow in futility. Not only was the Social Democratic leadership too wishy-washy and compromising, its voting constituencies among the working classes were themselves clueless about their real needs and their real but masked state of oppression.

The lesson that the leftest of the Left radicals drew was: So much for democracy. So much for the grass-roots, bottom-up approach, and so much for appealing to the masses and waiting for them to do anything. What socialism needs is *leadership*, leadership that will diagnose capitalism's problems clearly, set remedies, and act decisively and ruthlessly to achieve socialism—along the way telling the masses what they need to hear and what to do and when.

Ironically, then, by the 1930s large segments of the radical Left had come to agree with what national socialists and fascists had long argued: that socialism needs an aristocracy. Granted—the far Right and much of the far Left now agreed—socialism must be *for* the people. But it cannot be *by* the people. The people must be told what they need and how to get it; and for both the direction and impetus must come from an elite.

Thus, the Soviet Union came to be the great hope for socialism. With Joseph Stalin now running Russia on precisely that elitist model, the Soviet Union seemed the answer to most Left socialists' prayers. The failed predictions of classical Marxist socialism could be set aside and forgotten: the appropriate theoretical and practical adjustments had been made, and the future looked bright for socialism.

Good news for socialism: depression and war

Almost better than the example of the Soviet Union was the arrival of long-hoped-for economic trouble in the capitalist West. With the coming of the Great Crash in 1929 and the ensuing Depression, it

had to be that at long last capitalism's internal contradictions were manifesting themselves. Utilized productive capacity plunged, unemployment skyrocketed, tension among the classes increased dramatically, and as the months stretched into years no recovery was in sight.

All socialists were quick to see the Depression as a great opportunity. Surely anyone could see that this must be the end of the road for liberal capitalism. Even the less perspicacious working classes—especially since they were bearing the brunt of the pain—had to be able to see that. All that the socialists had to do was get their act together, and, led by an intransigent cadre of leaders, give tottering capitalism the shove it needed to topple it into the dustbin of history.⁸

It did not work out that way for the Left socialists. In both Germany and Italy the national socialists proved better at using the Depression to their advantage, somehow continuing to delude the proletariat about their real needs and stealing votes from the Left socialists.

As the world headed into war in the late 1930s, even the onset of hostilities brought hope to the Left. The war effort on the part of the liberal capitalist nations had to be their last, desperate hope to salvage something. There was also the strong possibility that if the war lasted the liberals and National Socialists would kill each other

⁸ In "The Depression and the Intellectuals," Sidney Hook (1988, Chapter 11) discusses these prevailing reactions among the American far Left. See also American Leftist James Burnham who saw the West's responses to the Depression and the rise of National Socialism as signs of its fundamental weakness: "In truth, the *bourgeoisie* itself has in large measure lost confidence in its own ideologies. The words begin to have a hollow sound in the most sympathetic capitalist ears. ... What was Munich and the whole policy of appeasement but a recognition of bourgeois impotence? The head of the British government's traveling to the feet of the Austrian housepainter was the fitting symbol of the capitalists' loss of faith in themselves" (Burnham 1941, 36). The Nazi-Soviet Pact in 1939 then made perfect sense: The joining of the two socialisms would, Burnham believed, "drive death wounds into capitalism."

off, or at the very least seriously weaken each other, leaving the field open for Left socialism—under the leadership of the Soviet Union—to sweep the world.

Again it did not work out that way. The war wrought enormous destruction on both sides, but the pickings were slim for the Left socialists. Physically and psychologically, Germany was devastated at the end of the war. Ideologically, the collectivist Right was defeated, demoralized, and appropriately demonized. But in the West, in spite of their losses and war-weariness, the liberal capitalist nations were physically mobilized and psychologically jubilant. The capitalist nations made the transition from war to peace relatively smoothly, and they saw their victory as not only a physical but a moral triumph for liberalism, democracy, and capitalism.

From the perspective of the Left, then, the defeat of the collectivist Right was a mixed blessing: a hated enemy was gone, but the Left was alone in the field against a victorious and vigorous liberal capitalist West.

Bad news: liberal capitalism rebounds

By the 1950s, the liberal nations had, damnably, recovered from the depression and the war and were, even worse, flourishing under capitalism.

That was extremely disappointing to the Left, but it was not necessarily hopeless. Lenin's theory of imperialism had explained that the effects of capitalist exploitation would not be found in the powerful and rich nations since those nations simply exported those costs to the poorer and weaker developing nations. So perhaps hope for revolution could be found in the developing capitalist nations. But over time that hope fizzled. The exported oppression was not to be found in those nations either. Nations that adopted capitalism in varying degrees were not suffering from their

trade with the richer nations. Instead, the trade was mutually beneficial and, from humble beginnings, those nations that adopted capitalist measures rose first to comfort and then to wealth.⁹ Just as a teenager typically starts working at low-tech, labor-intensive, low-paying jobs, and then acquires skills and so is promoted to positions that are higher-tech, information-intensive, and higher-paying, the developing capitalist nations followed the same pattern. And in the most developed nations, overall wealth was rising and poverty was decreasing yet further. What were once luxuries were becoming standard fare, and the working classes were enjoying stable employment, their television sets, the latest fashions, and their vacations across the country in their new cars.

In the 1950s, accordingly, the radical Left turned its attention and hopes even more strongly to the Soviet Union, looking for it to outstrip the capitalist West in being both an exemplar of moral idealism and a paragon of economic production.

Those hopes were soon to be dashed cruelly. While the economic data were mixed and the propaganda was heavy, the Soviet Union was experiencing chronic difficulties in providing basic consumer items and feeding its people. Some productive successes had been achieved by directing vast amounts of resources to the military and heavy industries. Yet in providing for its people's basic needs, the Soviet Union was not only not progressing—in many areas its production had declined to levels below those of the pre-1917, pre-communist-revolution era. In the 1950s, contemporary data from both Soviet and American sources painted much the same picture:¹⁰

⁹ See Reynolds 1996 for a useful summary.

¹⁰ "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," 1990, 1009.

Chart 5.2: Total Livestock in the Soviet Union (000,000)

	Cows	Cattle (incl. cows)	Hogs	Sheep and Goats	Horses
1916	28.8	58.4	23.0	96.3	38.2
1928	33.2	66.8	27.7	114.6	36.1
1941	27.8	54.5	27.5	91.6	21.0
1950	4.6	58.1	22.2	93.6	12.7
1951	24.3	57.1	24.4	99.0	13.8
1952	24.9	58.8	27.1	107.6	14.7
1953	24.3	56.6	28.5	109.9	15.3

Source: Report of Khrushchev to the Plenary Session of the Central Committee, Sept. 3, 1953, *Pravda*, September 15, 1953, and *Vestnik Statistiki*, No. 5 (May 1961).

Chart 5.3: Gross Physical Output for Selected Food Items*

	Grain	Potatoes	Vegetables	Milk	Meat (dr. weight)	Eggs
1940	83.0	75.9	13.7	33.64	4.69	12.21
1950	81.4	88.6	9.3	33.31	4.87	11.70
1951	78.9	59.6	9.0	36.15	4.67	13.25
1952	92.0	68.4	11.0	35.70	5.17	14.4
1953	82.5	72.6	11.4	36.47	5.82	16.06

* All values in millions of tons, except for eggs which are given in billions of units.
Source: Joint Economic Committee (86th Cong., 1st sess.), *Comparisons of the United States and Soviet Economies* 1959.

Data were sparse and subject to blinkered interpretations, but by the mid-1950s, a decade after the end of the war, the bloom was off the red rose of hope for even the most ardent of the Soviet fellow-travelers.

The rose was crushed in 1956.

Worse news: Khrushchev's revelations and Hungary

Socialists have generally been willing to grant that possibly, just possibly, capitalist economic production would outstrip socialist production. But no socialist has ever been willing to grant that capitalism can hold a candle to socialism *morally*.¹¹ Socialism is driven more than anything else by an ethic of altruism, by a conviction that morality is about selflessness, being willing to put others' needs before one's own, and, when necessary, being willing to sacrifice oneself for others, especially those others who are weaker and needier. Thus, to a socialist, any socialist nation has to be morally superior to any capitalist nation—socialist leaders are by definition concerned primarily about the needs of the citizens and are sensitively responsive to their expressions of concern, their grievances, and, when there are troubles, to their plights.

The year 1956 dealt two blows to that faith. The second blow came late in the year, in October, with the bloody suppression of a revolt in the Soviet-satellite state of Hungary. Strong dissatisfaction with chronic economic troubles and with being under the thumb of Moscow led to demonstrations and outbreaks of physical resistance to authority by Hungarian workers, students, and others. The Soviet response was swift and brutal: the tanks and the troops were sent in, demonstrators and their organizers were killed and executed, and the revolt was suppressed. The lesson to the Hungarians was administered before a world-wide audience: Dissent is not allowed; shut up, put up with it, and obey.

The first blow, however, delivered in February of 1956, was the one that had the most devastating impact on the future of Left

¹¹ "But no one has ever denied that capitalism ... is a system of unnecessary servitude, replete with irrationalities and ripe for destruction. Still less has anyone defended capitalism by claiming that a system of this sort might after all be good or desirable, and it is doubtful that any moral philosophy which could support such a claim would deserve serious consideration" (Wood, 1972, 282).

socialism. In a “secret speech” to the twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev made a sensational revelation of the crimes of Stalin’s era. In the name of the future of socialism, Stalin had had millions of his own citizens tortured, subjected to inhuman deprivations, executed, or sent to die in Siberian labor camps. What had been dismissed as capitalist propaganda was now revealed as true by the leader of the socialist world: The flagship socialist nation was guilty of horrors on an unimaginable scale.

Khrushchev’s shocking revelations caused a moral crisis among the socialist Left. Could it be true? Or, hopefully, could it be that Khrushchev was exaggerating or lying to score political points? Or, more sinisterly, had the leader of the socialist world become a stooge for the C.I.A., that sneaky agent of capitalist imperialism? But—if Khrushchev’s revelations were even partially true, then how could such horrors have happened under socialism? Is it possible that there is some flaw in socialism itself? No, of course not. And then of course—what about those gloating capitalists, hatefully saying “I told you so”?¹²

Schisms developed immediately within far Left circles over the proper response to the revelations—was the Soviet Union not the socialist ideal, or was Khrushchev a betrayer of the cause? Some extreme true believers took the position that Khrushchev was a traitor—and that in any case anything Stalin had done was no reflection upon socialism. That line became harder to maintain as time went on and more revelations about life in the Soviet Union came forth, confirming in gritty detail what Khrushchev had said. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, first published in the West in 1973, was the most widely read and condemnatory. Solzhenitsyn’s book drew upon extensive research and Solzhenitsyn’s own first hand experience of eight years’ imprisonment in

¹² Radosh (2001, 56) discusses the varied reactions among the American far Left to Khrushchev’s revelations and the Soviet suppression in Hungary.

the labor camps for the crime of having written in 1945 a letter critical of Stalin's regime.

As it became impossible to believe in the morality of the Soviet Union, a shrinking contingent of true believers shifted their devotions, first to communist China under Mao. But then came revelations of even worse horrors in China in the 1960s—including 30 million deaths between 1959 and 1961. Then Cuba was the great hope, and then Vietnam, then Cambodia, then Albania for awhile in the late 1970s, and then Nicaragua in the 1980s. But the data and the disappointments piled up, all dealing a solid and devastating blow to socialism's ability to claim a moral sanction.¹³

One such set of summary data is reproduced below in the form of a table comparing liberal democratic, authoritarian, and totalitarian governments in terms of one measure of morality: the number of their own citizens those governments have killed.

Chart 5.4: Deaths from Democide* Compared to Deaths from International War, 1900-1987

	Democratic	Authoritarian	Totalitarian
<i>Killed by Own Government</i>	2 million	29 million	138 million ^a
<i>Killed by International War</i>	4.4 million	15.3 million	14.4 million

* "Democide" is defined as "killing of one's own people."

a. Communist governments account for 110 million of these deaths.

Source: Rummel 1994.

¹³ Though not to all true believers. E.g., Brian Sweezy on the essential truth of Marx's doctrine, despite the twentieth century and the Soviet Union's collapse: "As far as the global capitalist system is concerned, its internal contradictions will hardly be affected one way or another ... these contradictions, as in the past, continue to multiply and intensify, with all indications pointing to the maturing of one or more serious crises in the not-so-distant future" (Sweezy, 1990, 278).

Included in the Totalitarian/Killed by Own Government cell are the 10 to 12 million human beings killed by the German National Socialists in the period 1933-1945. Subtracting that number from 138 million, along with subtracting a few million killed by miscellaneous totalitarian regimes, means that over 110 million human beings were killed by the governments of nations inspired by Left, primarily Marxist, socialism.¹⁴

The true believers aside, few far Left socialists waited until after the 1950s to see what further damning data would come forth. In France, for example, most French intellectuals had joined the Communist Party in the 1950s, including Michel Foucault, or had become at least very strong sympathizers, as did Jacques Derrida. Foucault became dissatisfied with the self-stultification that Party membership required: "Being obliged to stand behind a fact that was totally beyond credibility ... was part of that exercise of the 'dissolution of the self,' of the quest for a way to be 'other'."¹⁵ And so, as Derrida reports, many began to drift away:

For many of us, a certain (and I emphasize *certain*) end of communist Marxism did not await the recent collapse of the USSR and everything that depends on it throughout the world. All that started—all that was even *déjà vu*, indubitably—at the beginning of the '50s.¹⁶

The crises of the 1950s were enough for most Left intellectuals worldwide to recognize that the case for socialism was in serious trouble economically and morally. And they realized that making the case for socialism was being made doubly difficult by the fact that the capitalist countries were doing well economically and, for the most part, going in the right direction morally. It is hard to

¹⁴ See also Courtois et al. 1999.

¹⁵ Foucault in Miller 1993, 58. See also by contrast Crossman (1949, 6) on the psychological *appeal* to many converts of Communism's demand for spiritual and material self-sacrifice.

¹⁶ Derrida 1994, 14.

argue with prosperity, and it is hard to make stick any qualms one has about capitalism's moral status when confronted with the revelations about the horrible and very real failings of socialism in practice.

Some Left intellectuals retreated into despair — “The Millenium Has Been Cancelled,” wrote socialist historian Edward Hyams, ending on a note of resignation.¹⁷ But, for many theoreticians of the far Left, the crisis meant only that more radical responses to capitalism were needed.

Responding to the crisis: change socialism's ethical standard

What was once a monolithic Marxist Left proceeded to split into numerous camps. All of the camps recognized, though, that if the fight against capitalism were to be carried on, the first order of business was to distance socialism from the Soviet Union. Just as the disaster of National Socialism in Germany was not socialism, the disaster of Communism in the Soviet Union was not socialism. In fact, there were no real socialist societies anywhere, so pointing fingers of moral condemnation was simply meaningless.

With no real socialist states to uphold as positive examples of socialist practice, the Left's new strategies focused almost exclusively upon critiquing the liberal capitalist nations.

The first major new strategy required altering the ethical standard by which capitalism was attacked. A traditional criticism of capitalism had been that it causes poverty: Except for the very few rich at the top of the social heap, capitalism drives most people into bare subsistence. Capitalism was therefore immoral, for the basic moral test of a social system is its ability to provide for its people's basic economic needs. The ethical standard used in criticizing capitalism was, accordingly, Marx's slogan in *Critique of the Gotha Program*: “From each according to his ability, to each

¹⁷ Hyams 1973, 263.

according to his need.”¹⁸ Satisfying need was thus the fundamental criterion of morality.

Yet come the 1950s it was hard to argue that capitalism fails to satisfy its people’s needs. In fact, a big part of the problem seemed to be that capitalism had satisfied its people’s needs so well that the people had become fat and complacent and not at all revolutionary. So a moral standard that made satisfying needs primary was now useless in a critique of capitalism.

From need to equality

A new ethical standard was therefore necessary. With great fanfare, then, much of the Left changed its official ethical standard from *need to equality*. No longer was the primary criticism of capitalism to be that it failed to satisfy people’s needs. The primary criticism was to be that its people did not get an equal share.

The German Social Democrats took the lead in developing the new strategy. As the party most directly descended from Marx himself and still the leading socialist party in the Western world, the Social Democrats made major changes to their Basic Program at a Special Party Congress at Bad Godesberg in November of 1959. The most significant of the changes emphasized equality. The “Godesberg Program” recast the party from being a party of the defenseless and impoverished worker to being a party of the people at large. Since the worker seemed to be doing well enough under capitalism, the focus had to shift to different capitalist pathologies—the many inequalities across various social dimensions. One dimension singled out for special attention was the unequal sizes of business enterprises. Some businesses are much bigger than others, giving them an unfair advantage over their smaller competitors. So equalizing the competitive playing field became the new goal. No longer would the Social Democrats condemn all private businesses

¹⁸ Marx 1875, 531.

as rapacious and call for their outright socialization. Rather they would push for cutting bigger businesses down to size and for the strengthening small and middle sized businesses. In other words, achieving equality had supplanted satisfying basic needs as the revised standard by which to evaluate capitalism.

A variation on this strategy was implicit in a new definition of “poverty” that the Left began to offer in the early 1960s: the poverty that capitalism causes is not *absolute* but *relative*. Popularized in the United States by Michael Harrington and others,¹⁹ the new argument abandoned the claim that capitalism would generate a physically malnourished and therefore revolutionary proletariat—capitalism did not cause such *absolute* poverty. Rather the proletariat would become revolutionary because, while their basic *physical* needs were being met, they saw that some others in society had *relatively* much more than they did. Feeling excluded and without real opportunities to achieve the good life the rich were enjoying, the proletariat would experience *psychological* oppression and thus be driven to desperate measures.

Another variation on this strategy emerged as the formerly-monolithic Marxist socialist movement splintered in response to the crisis of socialism. Abandoning the traditional economic class analysis’s implication that effort should be focused upon achieving a universal class consciousness, Left thinkers and activists focused on narrower sub-divisions of the human species, concentrating their efforts on the special issues of women and of racial and ethnic minorities. Broadly Marxist themes of conflict and oppression carried over into the new splinter groups’ analyses, but again the dominant theme was equality. As with the economic proletariat, it was hard to deny that women and racial and ethnic minority groups had made significant gains in the liberal capitalist nations. So again the criticism of capitalism could not be that it drove those groups to outright poverty or slavery or some other form of

¹⁹ Harrington 1962; 1970, 355.

oppression. Instead the criticism focused on the lack of equality between groups—not, for example, that women were being forced into poverty, but rather that as a group they had been held back from achieving economic equality with men.

Common to all of these variations was a new emphasis on the principle of equality and a de-emphasis on the principle of need. In effect, in changing the ethical standard from need to equality, all of these new varieties of Left-socialism had resolved to quote Marx less and to quote Rousseau more.

From wealth is good to wealth is bad

A second strategic change in Left strategy involved a more audacious change of ethical standards. Traditionally, Marxist socialism had supposed that providing adequately for human needs was a basic test of a social system's morality. The achievement of wealth, accordingly, was a good thing since wealth brought with it better nutrition, housing, healthcare, and leisure time. And so capitalism was held to be evil because Marxists believed that it denied most of its population the ability to enjoy the fruits of wealth.

But as it became clear that capitalism is very good at producing the wealth and delivering the fruits—and that socialism is very bad at it—two new variations on Left thought turned this argument on its head and began to condemn capitalism precisely for being so good at producing wealth.

One variation of this argument appeared in the increasingly popular writings of Herbert Marcuse. Soon to be the leading philosopher of the New Left, Marcuse was best known for bringing the views of the Frankfurt School to prominence in the English-speaking world, especially in North America. Trained in philosophy in Germany, Marcuse had been an assistant to Heidegger from 1928 to 1933, and in his metaphysics and epistemology

Marcuse was mining the same Hegelian vein that Heidegger was. Politically, though, Marcuse was deeply engaged with Marxism and concerned with adapting Marxism to the unforeseen resilience of capitalism in resisting revolution.

Following Marx, Marcuse believed that the historical purpose of the proletariat was to be a revolutionary class. Its task was to overthrow capitalism. But that presupposed that capitalism would drive the proletariat into economic misery, which capitalism had failed to do. Instead, capitalism had produced great amounts of wealth and—here is the innovation—capitalism had used that wealth to oppress the proletariat. By making the members of the proletariat wealthy enough to become comfortable, capitalism had created a captive class: The proletariat had become locked into the capitalist system, dependent upon its goodies, and enslaved by the goal of climbing the economic ladder and to “the aggressive performances of ‘earning a living’.”²⁰ Not only was this a veiled form of oppression, Marcuse argued, the proletariat had become distracted from its historical task by the comforts and gadgets of capitalism. Capitalism’s producing so much wealth, therefore, is bad: It is in direct defiance of the moral imperative of historical progress toward socialism. It would be much better if the proletariat were in economic misery under capitalism, for then they would realize their oppression and then be psychologically primed to perform their historical mission.²¹

The second variation was seen in the Left turn that rising concern with environmental issues took. As the Marxist movement splintered and mutated into new forms, Left intellectuals and activists began to look for new ways to attack capitalism. Environmental issues, alongside women’s and minorities’ issues, came to be seen as a new weapon in the arsenal against capitalism

²⁰ Marcuse 1969, 5.

²¹ Other contributions of the Frankfurt School to the new directions in socialist strategy are discussed below. See pages 159-ff.

Traditional environmental philosophy had not been in principle in conflict with capitalism. It had held that a clean, sustainable, and beautiful environment was good because living in such an environment made human life healthier, wealthier, and more enjoyable. Human beings, acting to their advantage, change their environments to make them more productive, cleaner, and more attractive. In the short-run, there are often costs and trade-offs between economic growth and environmental cleanliness. But, the argument ran, in the middle- and long-run a healthy economy is compatible with a healthy environment. As human beings become richer, they have more disposable income with which to make their environments cleaner and more beautiful.

The new impetus in environmental thinking, however, brought the Marxist concepts of exploitation and alienation to bear upon environmental issues. As the stronger party, humans necessarily exploit harmfully the weaker parties—the other species and the non-organic environment itself. Consequently, as capitalist society develops, the result of the exploitation is a biological form of alienation: humans alienate themselves from the environment by despoiling it and making it unlivable, and non-human species are alienated by being driven to extinction.

On this analysis, the conflict between economic production and environmental health, then, is not merely in the short-run; it is fundamental and inescapable. The production of wealth itself is in mortal conflict with environmental health. And capitalism, since it is so good at producing wealth, must therefore be the environment's number one enemy.

Wealth, therefore, was no longer good. Living simply, avoiding producing or consuming as much as possible, was the new ideal.

The impetus of this new strategy, captured perfectly in the title of Rudolf Bahro's *From Red to Green*, integrated with the new emphasis on equality over need. In Marxism, humankind's technological mastery of nature was a presupposition of socialism.

Marxism was a humanism in the sense of putting human values at the core of its value framework and assuming that the environment is there for human beings to use and enjoy to their own ends. But, egalitarian critics began to argue more forcefully, just as males' putting their interests highest led them to subjugate women, and just as whites' putting their interests highest led them to subjugate all other races, humans' putting their interests highest had led to the subjugation of the other species and the environment as a whole.

The proposed solution then was the radical moral equality of all species. We must recognize not only that productivity and wealth are evil, but also that all species from bacteria to wood lice to aardvarks to humans are equal in moral value. "Deep ecology," as radical egalitarianism applied to environmental philosophy came to be called, thus rejected the humanistic elements of Marxism, and substituted explicitly Heidegger's anti-humanist value framework.²²

In effect, by rejecting high-tech socialism and substituting a vision of low-tech, egalitarian socialism, this new Left strategy also resolved to quote Marx less and to quote Rousseau more.

Responding to the crisis: change socialism's epistemology

While some on the Left modified their ethics, others set to revising Marxist psychology and epistemology. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s there had been some early suggestions that Marxism was too rationalistic, too logical and deterministic. In the 1920s, Mao had urged that will and assertion of the peasants and especially of the leaders counted for more than passively waiting for the material conditions of revolution to work themselves out deterministically. In the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci had rejected the belief that the Depression would necessarily spell the doom of capitalism, and he had argued that finishing capitalism off would require the creative

²² Heidegger 1947, 1949.

initiative of the masses. That creative initiative, Gamski argued, was however neither rational nor inexorable but rather subjective and unpredictable. And early Frankfurt School theorizing had suggested that Marxism was too wedded to reason, that reason led to major social pathologies, and that less rational psychological forces had to be incorporated into any successful social theory.

Those voices were mostly ignored for two decades, swept aside by the dominant voices of classical Marxist theory, the Depression and World War II, and by the conviction that the Soviet Union was showing the world the true path.

By the 1950s, however, two developments began to merge, one epistemological and one political-economic. In the world of academic epistemology, both European and Anglo-American theorists were reaching skeptical and pessimistic conclusions about the powers of reason: Heidegger was ascendant on the Continent and Logical Positivism was reaching its dead end in the Anglo-American world. And in both theoretical and practical politics and economics, the failure of Marxism to develop according to the logic of its traditional theory was reaching a crisis. The merging of these two developments yielded the surging to prominence of non-rational and irrationalist Left socialisms.

The symptoms were many. One was manifest in the splintering of the monolithic Marxist movement into many sub-movements emphasizing the socialism of sex, race, and ethnic identity. Such movements abandoned the universalistic conceptions of human interests implicit in seeking a collective consciousness of the international proletariat. The international proletariat is a highly abstract concept. The universality of all human interests is a very sweeping generalization. Both abstraction and generalization require a strong confidence in the power of reason, and by the 1950s that confidence in reason had evaporated.²³

²³ See Chapter Three above.

The loss of confidence in reason implied, as a matter of practical politics, that the intellectuals now had even less confidence in the average person's capacity for abstract reasoning. It is hard enough for a trained intellectual to conceive, as classical Marxism requires, of all of humankind as ultimately members of a universal class sharing the same universal interests. But—the more epistemologically-modest theorists of the 1950s begin to ask—can we really expect the masses to abstract to the view that we are all brothers and sisters under the skin? Can the masses conceive of themselves as a harmonious international class? The intellectual capacity of the masses is much more limited, so appealing to and mobilizing the masses requires speaking to them about what matters to them and on a level that they can grasp. What the masses can understand and what they do get fired up about are their sexual, racial, ethnic, and religious identities. Both epistemological modesty and effective communication strategy, then, dictated a move from universalism to multiculturalism.²⁴

In effect, by the late 1950s and early 1960s, significant portions of the Left came to agree with the collectivist Right on yet another

²⁴ For example, British Marxist Ralph Miliband: "Marx and later Marxists [were] far too optimistic in relying on the class location of wage earners to produce a 'class consciousness' that would obliterate all divisions among them. This quite clearly greatly underestimated the strength of these divisions; and it also failed to take account of what might be called an epistemic dimension, meaning that it is a great deal *easier* to attribute social ills to Jews, black people, immigrants, other ethnic or religious groups than to a social system and to the men who run it and who are of the same nationality, ethnicity, or religion. To acquire *this* class consciousness requires a mental leap which many people in the working class (and beyond) have performed, but which many other people, subject to intense obfuscations, have not ... [C]lass location produces a consciousness which is much more complex and wayward than Marxism assumed; for it leads to reactionary positions as well as progressive ones ..." (in Panitch ed., 1995, 19).

See also Rorty: "our sense of solidarity is strongest when those with whom solidarity is expressed are thought of as 'one of us,' where 'us' means something smaller and more local than the human race" (1989, 191).

issue: Forget internationalism, universalism, and cosmopolitanism; focus on smaller groups formed on the basis of ethnic, racial, or other identities.

Another symptom of the rejection of reason was the wild rise in popularity of Mao and China among the younger radicals. Not as committed to the Soviet Union as the older generation of Leftists was, many in the younger generation turned enthusiastically to Chinese Communism in practice and Maoist Marxism in theory. Mao's *Little Red Book* was read widely on college campuses and increasingly studied by revolutionaries-in-training. From it they absorbed Mao's lessons of making revolution through sheer political and ideological will, of not waiting for material conditions to develop of themselves, of being pragmatic and opportunistic and willing to use ambiguous rhetoric and even cruelty—and, above all, of being constantly and militantly activist even to the point of wildness and irrationality. Make the revolution *somehow* and *anyhow!*

In effect, this strain of Left thought came to agree with what the collectivist Right had long argued: that human beings are not fundamentally rational—that in politics it is the irrational passions that must be appealed to and utilized.

The lessons of Maoism integrated with the lessons of the pre-eminent philosopher of the New Left, Herbert Marcuse.

Marcuse and the Frankfurt School: Marx plus Freud, or oppression plus repression

Marcuse had long labored in the trenches of academic philosophy and social theory before coming to fame in America in the 1960s. He studied philosophy at Freiburg under Husserl and Heidegger, later becoming an assistant to both. His first major publication was

an attempt to synthesize Heideggerian phenomenology with Marxism.²⁵

His powerful allegiance to Marxism combined with his Heideggerian distrust of Marxism's rationalistic elements led Marcuse to join forces with the nascent Frankfurt School of social thought. The Frankfurt School was a loose association of mostly German intellectuals centered at the Institute for Social Research, led from 1930 on by Max Horkheimer.

Horkheimer had also been trained in philosophy, having completed his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of Kant in 1923. From that work Horkheimer moved directly to concerns with social psychology and practical politics. In the late 1920s, while Marcuse was working on his theoretical integration of Marx and Heidegger, Horkheimer was reaching some pessimistic conclusions about the possibility of practical political change.

Setting before himself the question of why the German proletariat were not revolting, Horkheimer offered a breakdown of the politically relevant units, arguing that each was incapable of achieving anything significant.²⁶ Naturally enough, Horkheimer began his analysis with the working classes, dividing them into the employed and the unemployed. The employed, he noted, are not too badly off and seem content enough. It is the unemployed who are in the worst shape. Their situation is also getting worse, for as the mechanization of production increases, unemployment also increases. But the unemployed are also the least educated class and the least organized, and that has made it impossible to raise their class consciousness. A clear sign of this is that they waver between voting for the Communists, who are blindly following Moscow, and the National Socialists who are, well, a bunch of Nazis. The only other socialist party is the Social Democrats, but they are much too pragmatic and reformist to be effective.

²⁵ Marcuse 1928.

²⁶ Horkheimer 1927, 316-18.

So, Horkheimer concluded, the situation is hopeless for socialism. The employed are too comfortable, the unemployed are too scatterbrained, the social democrats are too wishy-washy, the communists are too obediently following authority, and the National Socialists are un-discussable.

As way out of the morass, the Frankfurt School's members began to explore the idea of adding a more sophisticated social psychology to Marxism's economic and historical logic. Traditional Marxism emphasized the inexorable laws of economic development and de-emphasized the contribution of human actors. Given that those Marxist laws seemed rather more exorable in their non-development, the Frankfurt School suggested that history is as much made by human actors, and especially by how those human actors understand themselves psychologically and their existential situation. Incorporating a better social psychology into Marxism would hopefully explain why the revolution had not happened and suggest what would be necessary to make it happen.

For sophisticated social psychology the Frankfurt School turned to Sigmund Freud. Applying his own psychoanalytic theories to social philosophy, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930) argued that civilization is an unstable, surface phenomenon based upon the repression of instinctual energies. Bio-psychologically, human agents are a bundle of aggressive and conflicted instincts, those instincts constantly pressing for immediate satisfaction. Their constant immediate satisfaction, though, would make social living impossible, so the forces of civilization have evolved by incrementally suppressing instincts and forcing their expression into polite, orderly, and rational forms. Civilization is thus an artificial construct overlaying a seething mass of irrational energies in the id. The battle between the id and civilization is ongoing and occasionally brutal. To the extent that the id wins, society tends toward conflict and chaos; and to the extent that society wins, the id is forced into repression. Repression, however, merely forces the

id's energies underground psychologically, where those energies are unconsciously displaced and often forced into irrational channels. That displaced energy, Freud explained, must discharge itself eventually, and often it does so by bursting out neurotically — in the form of hysterias, obsessions, and phobias.²⁷

The task of the psychoanalyst, then, is to trace the neurosis back through its irrational, unconscious channels to its origin. Patients, however, often interfere with this process: they resist the exposure of unconscious and irrational elements in their psyches and they cling to the conscious forms of civilized and rational behavior that they have learned. So the psychoanalyst must find a way to bypass those surface, blocking behaviors, and to strip away the conscious veneer of civility to probe the seething id below. Here, Freud suggested, the use of non-rational psychological mechanisms becomes essential — dreams, hypnosis, free-association, slips of the tongue. Such manifestations of irrationality are often clues to the underlying reality, for they slip past the patient's conscious defense mechanisms. The well-trained psychoanalyst, accordingly, is the one who is able to spot the truth in the irrational.

To the Frankfurt School, Freud offered a psychology admirably suited to diagnosing the pathologies of capitalism. Capitalism, we know from Marx, is definitely based on exploitative competition. But modern capitalist society is taking a technocratic form, directing its conflictual energies toward creating machines and corporate bureaucracies. Those machines and bureaucracies do provide for the average member of the bourgeoisie an artificial world of order, control, and creature comforts—but at a very high cost: capitalism's people are increasingly distant from nature, decreasingly spontaneous and creative, increasingly unaware that they are being controlled by the machines and the bureaucracies, both physically and psychologically, and increasingly unaware that the apparently

²⁷ Freud 1930, esp. Ch. 3.

comfortable world they live in is a mask for an underlying realm of brutal conflict and competition.²⁸

The Frankfurt School portrait of capitalism, Marcuse explained, is what we find realized most extremely in the most advanced capitalist nation, the United States.

Consider Joe Sixpack. Joe works as a low-level technician for a television-manufacturing company, part of a huge telecommunications conglomerate. Whether he has a job tomorrow depends on Wall Street speculators and the decisions of a corporate headquarters in another state. But Joe does not realize that: he simply goes to work each morning with a slight sense of distaste, pulls the levers and pushes the buttons as he is told to do by the machine and the boss, mass-producing televisions until it is time to go home. On the way home he picks up a six-pack of beer—another mass-market product of capitalist commodification—and after supper with the family he plops down in front of the television, feeling the narcotic effect of the beer kicking in while the sit-coms and commercials tell him that life is great and who could ask for anything more. Tomorrow is another day.

Joe Sixpack is a product. He is a constructed part of an oppressive and dysfunctional competitive system—but one that is overlain with the veneer of peace and comfort.²⁹ He is unaware of the gap between the appearance of comfort and the reality of oppression, unaware that he is a cog in an artificial technological system—unaware because the fruits of capitalism that he produces and thinks he enjoys consuming are sapping his vital instincts and making him physically and psychologically inert.

Thus Marcuse had an explanation for the new generation of revolutionaries-in-training for why capitalism in the 1950s and early 1960s seemed to be peaceful, tolerant, and progressive—when, as every good socialist knew, it could not really be—and for

²⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno 1944, xiv-xv.

²⁹ Marcuse 1969, 13-15.

why the workers were so disappointingly un-revolutionary. Capitalism does not merely *oppress* the masses existentially, it also *represses* them psychologically.

It gets worse, for to the extent that Joe can even think about his situation, he hears his world described in terms of “freedom,” “democracy,” “progress”—words that have only a faint glimmer of meaning to him, and that have been crafted and fed to him by capitalism’s apologists to keep him from thinking too deeply about his real existence. Joe is a “one-dimensional man” trapped in a “totalitarian universe of technological rationality,”³⁰ oblivious to the second and real dimension of human existence wherein true freedom, democracy, and progress lie.³¹

Capitalism’s having achieved this cynical state of development, in which its oppression is masked by pious hypocrisies about liberty and progress, is made even more cynical by its being able to neutralize and even co-opt all dissent and criticism. Having created a monolithic technocracy—the machines and the bureaucracies and the mass man and the self-serving ideology—capitalism can pretend to be open to criticism by allowing some radical intellectuals to dissent. In the name of “tolerance,” “open-mindedness,” and “free speech,” a few lonely voices will be permitted to raise object-

³⁰ Marcuse 1964, 123.

³¹ Marcuse is thus halfway between Rousseau and Foucault. Rousseau (1749): “Princes always view with pleasure the spread among their subjects of a taste for the arts. ... The sciences, letters and arts ... cover with garlands of flowers the iron chains that bind them, stifle in them the feeling of that original liberty for which they seem to have been born, make them love their slavery, and turn them into what is called civilized people.” Foucault: “What is fascinating about prisons is that, for once, power doesn’t hide or mask itself; it reveals itself as tyranny pursued into the tiniest details; it is cynical and at the same time pure and entirely ‘justified,’ because its practice can be totally formulated within the framework of morality. Its brutal tyranny consequently appears as the serene domination of Good over Evil, or order over disorder” (1977b, 210). Also: “If I had known the Frankfurt School at the right time, I would have been spared a lot of work” (Foucault 1989, 353).

ions and challenges to the capitalist behemoth.³² But everyone knows full well that nothing come of the criticisms. Worse still, the appearance of having been open and tolerant will serve only to reinforce capitalism's control. Capitalist tolerance, then, is not real tolerance: it is "Repressive Tolerance."³³

So was Horkheimer's early pessimism right? Was the lesson thirty years later still the same—that the prospect for socialism is totally hopeless? If capitalism's control extends even to co-opting the dissent of its strongest critics, what weapons are left to the revolutionary?

If there is a chance for socialism, then more extreme tactics will be necessary.

Freudian psychology again gives us the key. As with the repression of the id's energies by the forces of civilization, capitalism's suppression of the original human energies cannot be totally successful. Freud had explained that the id's repressed energies will occasionally burst out in irrational, neurotic forms, threatening the stability and security of civilization. The Frankfurt School taught us that capitalism's orderly technocracy has repressed much of humanity, driving much of its energy underground—but that repressed energy is still there, and potentially it can burst out.

Thus, Marcuse concluded, capitalism's repression of human nature may be socialism's salvation. Capitalism's rational technocracy suppresses human nature to the point that it bursts out in irrationalisms—in violence, criminality, racism, and all of society's other pathologies. But by encouraging those irrationalisms the new revolutionaries can destroy the system. So the first task of the revolutionary is to seek out those individuals and energies on the margins of society: the outcast, the disorderly, and the forbidden—anyone and anything that capitalism's power structure has not yet

³² Marcuse 1965, 94-96.

³³ The title of Marcuse's influential 1965 essay.

succeeded in commodifying and dominating totally. All such marginalized and outcast elements will be “irrational,” “immoral,” and even “criminal,” especially by capitalist definition, but that is precisely what the revolutionary needs. Any such outcast element could “break through the false consciousness [and] provide the Archimedean point for a larger emancipation.”³⁴

Marcuse looked especially to the marginalized and outcast Left intellectual *leadership*—especially those trained in critical theory.³⁵ Given the pervasiveness of capitalism’s domination, the revolutionary vanguard can come only from those outcast intellectuals—especially among the younger students³⁶—those who are able to “link liberation with the dissolution of ordinary and orderly perception”³⁷ and who thereby can see through the appearance of peace to the reality of oppression, who have retained enough of their humanity not to have been turned into Joe Sixpack—and above all who have the will and the energy to do anything it takes, even to the point of being “militantly intolerant and disobedient,”³⁸ to shock the capitalist power structure into revealing its true nature, thus toppling and smashing the system to pieces, leaving the way open for a renewal of humanity through socialism.

Marcuse’s reign as the pre-eminent philosopher of the New Left signaled a strong turn towards irrationality and violence among younger Leftists. “Marx, Marcuse, and Mao” became the new trinity and the slogan to rally under. As was proclaimed on a banner of students involved in closing the University of Rome: *Marx is the prophet, Marcuse is his interpreter, and Mao is the sword.*

Many in the new generation listened attentively and sharpened their swords.

³⁴ Marcuse 1965, 111.

³⁵ Marcuse 1969, 89.

³⁶ Marcuse 1969, ix-x, 59.

³⁷ Marcuse 1969, 37.

³⁸ Marcuse 1965, 123.

The rise and fall of Left terrorism

By the late 1950s and early 1960s, five crucial elements coalesced and turned elements of the far Left into a movement committed to revolutionary violence.

- Epistemologically, the prevailing academic and intellectual climate was either anti-reason, ineffectual in defending reason, or saw reason as irrelevant to practical matters. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Kuhn spoke the new language of thought. Reason is out, the intellectuals were teaching, and what matters above all is *will*, authentic *passion*, and non-rational *commitment*.

- Practically, after a century of waiting for the revolution, impatience had peaked. Among the younger generation especially, there was a dominant bent toward activism and away from academic theorizing. Theoreticians still had an audience, but theory had not amounted to much—what was needed was *decisive action now*.

- Morally, there was the extreme disappointment at the failure of the classical socialist ideal. The great ideal of Marxism had failed to materialize. The purity of Marxist theory had been subjected to necessary but defiling revisions. The noble experiment in the Soviet Union had been revealed to be a horrible fraud and a crime. As a response to these crushing and humiliating blows, *rage* at the failure and *betrayal* of a utopian dream was widespread.

- Psychologically, in addition to the rage of disappointment there was the supreme insult of seeing the hated enemy flourishing. Capitalism was enjoying itself, prospering, and even smirking at socialism's discomforts and disorientation. In the face of such insults, there was the desire to do nothing more than to smash the enemy, to see it hurt, bleeding, *destroyed*.

- Politically, there was the justification of irrational violence in the theories of the Frankfurt School as applied by Marcuse. The

righteous revolutionary knows that the masses are oppressed but held captive by the veil of capitalist false consciousness. The revolutionary knows that it will take individuals with special insight, special individuals immune to the corruptions of capitalism, special individuals able to gaze right through its veil of repressive tolerance, absolutely rejecting compromise and willing to *do anything* to rip away the veil and expose the seething horrors below.

The rise of Left terrorism in the 1960s was one consequence.

Chart 5.5: Left Terrorist Groups' Founding Dates

Weathermen (USA)	1960
United Red Army (Japan)	1960s
Black Panthers (USA)	1960s
SWAPO (South West Africa)	1960s
ALN (Brazil)	1960s
Tupamaros (Uruguay)	1962 (active after 1968)
FLQ (Canada)	1963
PLO (Middle East)	1964
Montoneros (Argentina)	1960s
ERP (Argentina)	1960s
Red Brigade (Italy)	1968
PFLP (Middle East)	1968
DPFLP (Middle East)	1968
Red Army Faction, or Baader-Meinhof (Germany)	1970
Black September (Middle East)	1970
SLA (USA)	Early 1970s

Source: Guelke 1995.

The founding dates of some of these terrorists groups are obscure. All however, were explicitly Marxist socialist and none had existed prior to 1960. Some of the groups also had strong nationalistic overtones. Not included in the chart, however, are terrorist groups that had begun earlier for primarily nationalist or religious reasons but in the 1960s came to incorporate Marxism into their theories and manifestos.

In addition to the five factors listed above, several particular events served as triggers in causing the upsurge in violence. Among the far Left, the death of Che Guevara in 1967 and the failure of the 1968 student demonstrations in most Western nations—and especially of the student revolts in France—contributed to the anger and disappointment. Several of the terrorist manifestos published after 1968 make explicit mention of those events, as well as reflecting the broader themes of irrational will, exploitation, commodification, rage, and the need simply to do *something*. For example, Pierre Victor—then the leader of the French Maoists with whom Michel Foucault was associated—hearkened back to the French Revolution’s Reign of Terror and declared the following in the pages of *La Cause du peuple*, the Maoist newspaper:

To overthrow the authority of the bourgeois class, the humiliated population has reason to institute a brief period of terror and to assault bodily a handful of contemptible, hateful individuals. It is difficult to attack the authority of a class without a few heads belonging to members of this class being paraded on the end of a stake.³⁹

Other terrorists cast their nets more broadly. Before her death, Ulrike Meinhof made very clear the broad purpose of the Red Army Faction she and Andreas Baader founded in Germany: “The anti-imperialist struggle, if it is to be more than mere chatter, means annihilation, destruction, the shattering of the imperialist power system—political, economic and military.” She also made clear the

³⁹ In Miller 1993, 232.

broader historical context within which she thought terrorism was necessary, the more specific events that had served as triggers, and gave an assessment of the likelihood of their success:

Nauseated by the proliferation of the conditions they found in the system, the total commercialization and absolute mendacity in all areas of the superstructure, deeply disappointed by the actions of the student movement and the Extraparliamentary Opposition, they thought it essential to spread the idea of armed struggle. Not because they were so blind as to believe they could keep that initiative going until the revolution triumphed in Germany, not because they imagined they could not be shot or arrested. Not because they so misjudged the situation as to think the masses would simply rise at such a signal. It was a matter of salvaging, historically, the whole state of understanding attained by the movement of 1967/1968; it was a case of not letting the struggle fall apart again.⁴⁰

The rise of Left terrorism in nations other than those controlled by explicitly Marxist governments was a striking feature of the 1960s and early 1970s. Combined with the broader turn of the Left to non-rationalism, irrationalism, and physical activism, the terrorist movement made that era the most confrontational and bloody in the history of the Left socialist movements of those nations.

But the liberal capitalists were not entirely soft and complacent, and by the mid-1970s their police and military forces had defeated the terrorists, killing some, imprisoning many, driving others underground more or less permanently.

⁴⁰ In Guelke 1995, 93, 97.

From the collapse of the New Left to postmodernism

With the collapse of the New Left, the socialist movement was dispirited and in disarray. No one was waiting expectantly for socialism to materialize. No one thought it could be achieved by appealing to the electorate. No one was in a position to mount a coup. And those willing to use violence were dead, in jail, or underground.

What then was to be the next step for socialism? In 1974, Herbert Marcuse was asked whether he thought the New Left was history. He replied: "I don't think it's dead, and it will resurrect in the universities."

With hindsight we can identify those who came to prominence as the leaders of the postmodern movement: Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. But we can now ask, Why those four?

For all four the personal and the professional are tightly linked, so a few biographical details are relevant.

Foucault was born in 1926. He studied philosophy and psychology, receiving degrees from the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne. He was a member of the French Communist Party from 1950 to 1953, but left over differences that eventually led him to declare himself a Maoist in 1968.⁴¹

Lyotard was born in 1924. Before turning to professional philosophy he spent twelve years doing theoretical and practical work for the radical Left group *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. He finished his formal training in philosophy in 1958.

Derrida was born in 1930. He began his formal study of philosophy in 1952 at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he studied under Foucault. He associated closely with a group

⁴¹ The dates of Foucault's membership in the French Communist Party overlap with the 1948-1953 dates of Pol Pot's membership in the French Communist Party.

focused around *Tel Quel*, a far Left journal, and while sympathetic to the French Communist Party he did not go so far as to join.

Rorty was born in 1931. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Yale in 1956. Not as far Left politically as the other three, Rorty is a strong social democrat who cites Socialist Party candidate and union leader A. Philip Randolph, for whom his parents worked for a time, as one of his great heroes.

All four of these postmodernists were born within a seven-year span. All were well trained in philosophy at the best schools. All entered their academic careers in the 1950s. All were strongly committed to Left politics. All were well aware of the history of socialist theory and practice. All lived through the crises of socialism of the 1950s and 1960s. And come the end of the 1960s and early 1970s, all four had high standing in their professional academic disciplines and high standing among the intellectual Left.

Accordingly, in the 1970s, as the far Left collapsed once again, it turned to those best able to think strategically, those best able to situate the Left historically and politically, and those most up to speed on the latest trends in epistemology and the state of knowledge. Foucault, Lyotard, Derrida, and Rorty proved themselves by those criteria. Accordingly, it was those four who signaled the new direction for the academic Left.

If one is an *academic* foe of capitalism, then one's weapons and tactics are not those of the politician, the activist, the revolutionary, or the terrorist. Academics' only possible weapons are words. And if one's epistemology tells one that words are not about truth or reality or in any way cognitive, then in the battle against capitalism words can be only a *rhetorical* weapon.

The next question, then, is how postmodern epistemology comes to be integrated with postmodern politics.

* * *

**Chart 5.6: The Evolution of Socialist Strategies
(Or: From Marx to the Neo-Rousseauians)**



