

Paul Le Blanc,
From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics
 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press 1997)

Since I came of age in the early 1980s, the left has been under assault – and has generally been losing. Capital and its political allies, whether in the Republican or Democratic parties, have eviscerated the power of unions, community and consumer organizations. Furthermore, countering the media’s constant barrage of right-wing “populist” ideas has absorbed a considerable amount of leftists’ energies. While the right may not have been successful in winning truly broad support for its agenda, it has undermined the ability of the left to mobilize its constituencies. Just think of how many times you’ve lost the argument or struggle about why (take your pick) public transportation, education, the environment, children or your job shouldn’t be forced to embrace the “natural” and “invigorating” power of the market. It’s no wonder that many leftists from the 1960s and 1970s have defected (either to the university or just plain defected) and many others have had to develop remarkable powers of will. Tragically, in this context, Marxism has largely become a subject of interest for academicians or sectarians.

In these dark days, many socialist organizations have either collapsed, (remember the Guardian?) turned to the right (endorsing Clinton, etc.) or suffered a severe hardening of the organizational or intellectual arteries (left groupuscles too numerous to mention). Ironically, this has been occurring just as global capitalism is choking on its contradictions, or rather forcing the working class to do so, and anger at the new world disorder is growing. In this context, the old mole may yet reappear and the relentless grinding up of socialist organizations may simply be part of a historical process in which the left is being remade into something not-yet-born. Paul Le Blanc’s *From Marx to Gramsci: A Reader in Revolutionary Marxist Politics* may aid the process of the left’s reformation by helping us to reclaim Marxism as a tool that can clarify the political tasks that confront us.

At first glance, the subtitle of this volume would seem to be redundant. After all, isn’t Marxism an inherently revolutionary project? Somewhat surprisingly, Le Blanc’s is the first anthology that focuses on the practical and political content of Marxists’ writings. While some scholars have found Marxism a refuge from the world’s harsh realities, that was hardly the case for committed revolutionaries such as Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg or Gramsci. For these activists, Marxism was a method of inquiry and dialogue that was both informed by working-class struggle and a way of illuminating the path forward

towards the overthrow of capitalism.

Despite their differences, Le Blanc finds that all these intellectuals shared a common commitment to working-class struggle and to historical materialism. Marx and Engels may have been clever lads, but they also spent considerable energies in dialogue with their comrades throughout the world. Lenin was not simply a writer of “how to” manuals for seizing state power, but a careful theoretician on the problematic nature of the bourgeois state. Furthermore, his observations about the degenerations that occur when working-class struggle isn’t linked to the socialist project (or vice versa) remains relevant for today.

What emerges from these excerpts are not timeless truths that can simply be memorized for application in tomorrow’s battles, but a core of principles and a method of investigation that is organically linked to working-class struggle. While these writers disagreed, they did so as comrades who believed in the revolutionary potential of the working class. The theory and tactics of revolutionary struggle both evolved to fit the changing organization and disorganization of capital, the state and workers themselves.

It is worth reminding ourselves that whatever her differences with Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg saved her most scathing criticisms for the bureaucratic timidity of German Social Democracy. It is also worth reminding ourselves that while Gramsci was a clever cultural analyst, he did so as a Marxist-Leninist revolutionary struggling to build a party and movement capable of overthrowing the dictatorship of capital. Finally, Trotsky was more than a brilliant theoretician on the nature of capitalism’s global combined and uneven development, but also a builder of international working-class organizations.

The work is suitable for old hands as well as for fresh recruits. In part this is because Paul Le Blanc has written a series of clearly-written, insightful, and powerful essays on the relevance of Marxism for scholars and activists today. Some of the best essays show the continuity of Marx’s thought through Lenin and Trotsky. Le Blanc’s explanation of Lenin’s concept of the vanguard party is instructive for helping to explain the problematic history of would-be Leninist organizations in recent times. Lenin’s vanguard was not the Bolshevik party in and of itself, but the militant and class-conscious layer of the working class that had been won to revolutionary ideas.

Thus the correct party line, so well beloved by so many Leninist sects, can only get you so far. On the other hand, once this vanguard was directed away from revolutionary goals to simply defense of “socialism in one country” under Stalin, the results were disastrous. Le Blanc reminds us that while Marxism can help us to understand the reasons for the collapse of “actually-existing socialism,” it is only the application of revolutionary praxis which can rejuvenate the

socialist project.

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