

# Marxism Historicized: Korsch's *The Crisis of Marxism*

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"The Crisis of Marxism" was written by Karl Korsch in 1931 for purposes of "self-clarification." It remained unpublished until 1971, ten years after the author's death, when it appeared in a collection of essays entitled *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (The Materialist Conception of History) published in West Germany. The fact that this essay remains a penetrating critique of the atrophy of Marxist theory today, both under state socialism as well as within certain tendencies of the Left in advanced capitalist societies, should not let us lose sight of the context from which it emerged. In 1929, after a decade of involvement in the disintegrating political environment of Weimar Germany, Korsch began a major reevaluation of Marxism. The seven theses developed in "The Crisis of Marxism" represent a critical summation of several major themes in his own political and theoretical development during those years. The "Crisis of Marxism" of 1931 was the expressed crisis of a particular set of circumstances in which Korsch himself was involved, and it is only through understanding those historical parameters that we can draw analogies and derive lessons for the present. The years between 1919 and 1927 meant change and political upheaval for Korsch and German Communism. A leading theorist of the Berlin Workers' Councils and the Revolutionary Shop Stewards and a member of the USPD (the Independent Socialist Party), Korsch joined the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) after the USPD split in 1920. Here he was to play a key role until his expulsion in 1926. Active first in the educational wing of the new party, Korsch was later elected a delegate to the Thuringian Landtag in 1924 and, in July of the same year, became a Communist deputy in the Reichstag. In 1923 he participated in the short-lived revolutionary takeover in Thuringia and Saxony, when he served as Minister of Justice in the workers' government set up by the KPD in Thuringia at that time. The unsuccessful October revolution in Thuringia and Saxony led to the banning of the KPD and a loss of 50 per cent of its membership. Within the Party it resulted in a shift to the left: greater emphasis upon strong centralized and revolutionary activity and a rejection of the united front policy with the SPD. Korsch's role in this process was complicated and paradoxical. On the one hand, he joined the left leadership of Arkadi Maslow and Ruth Fischer in their ouster of the previous Brandler leadership, and in so doing, participated in the Bolshevization of the Communist International which was occurring throughout the European sections during this period. Yet it was precisely his efforts to reestablish the dialectical totality of Lenin's tactics-his emphasis on building a class-conscious, knowledgeable and "heroic" Communist Party which develops policy on the basis of practical experience and in contact with the masses (1) - precisely the subjective, fighting moment of Bolshevism which brought him into conflict with the Comintern. Beginning in 1924, first as editor of the KPD's central organ *Die Internationale*, and finally as a member of various splinter groups outside the Party itself, Korsch waged an unending battle against Russian domination of the German Communist movement. A paradox parallel to that of Korsch's political activity lies at the root of his major theoretical work of this period, *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923). According to Korsch himself, this essay was to provide a materialist grounding and truly mediated historical understanding of the realm of bourgeois philosophy and ideas, similar to what Lenin had provided for the bourgeois state in *State and Revolution*. Yet this revitalization of Marxism, with its emphasis upon historical method, was in fact to create the theoretical groundwork for a critique first of "Leninism" (as a "decay" of Lenin's thought) (2) and later of Lenin's thought itself. (3) Thus both in his theoretical and political activity, Korsch became a focal point in the struggle against the inculcation of dogma and for the unity of theory and practice. And, in both capacities-as a critical thinker forced constantly to test his ideas in concrete struggles and as a political activist in the constant process of self-reflection (he wrote over 100 political essays between 1919 and 1926)-Korsch unfolds the theoretical-practical premises of his position. At the core of this position is the notion that Marxism, as a true theory, is "nothing less than the expression of the real historical movement." Korsch's relentless effort to apply this theorem, his discovery and rediscovery of its inner meanings and practical implications, force him to the limits (and some say beyond the limits) of Marxism itself. Certainly this theorem forms the methodological basis for both *Marxism and Philosophy*, as the theoretical beginning, and "Crisis," as one theoretical summation of the period in question. But again there is a paradox: it also constitutes the basis of their

differences. In *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch opposes the concept that the realm of ideas is simply an epiphenomenal, secondary reflection of the real, objective world. He counters with the notion that ideas are "realities not pseudo-realities," that the material relations of production "are only what they are in combination with the forms in which they are reflected."<sup>(4)</sup> Hence, scientific socialism "is the theoretical expression of a revolutionary process, which will end with the total abolition of these bourgeois philosophies and sciences, as well as with the abolition of the material relations that find their ideological expression in them."<sup>(5)</sup> Any theory which is not a total expression, i.e., any theory which severs its connection with the process in which it evolves, thereby becoming a set of absolute principles, is itself ideology. For Korsch this is what happened to Marxism in the latter half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the Second International. Thus, his attempt to "restore the correct and full sense of Marx's theory" necessitated an historical treatment of Marxism itself. It is this central thought to which Korsch returns in the essay "The Crisis of Marxism" in 1931 -with one important shift in emphasis. Whereas in the earlier work Korsch focuses his critique primarily on the "epigones" who "banalize and denature" the inherently revolutionary content of Marx's and Engels' theory, Korsch now sees much more insistently the crisis of Marxism as "the crisis of Marx's and Engels' theory as well." The distinction between early (pre-1850) revolutionary Marxism and the later, more scientific development of Marxist economic theory-the "political" and "economic" Marx-is understood historically in much the same way in both essays. Nevertheless, the thrust of Korsch's critique in the "Crisis" essay is much more clearly aimed at the evolution within Marx's and Engels' thought itself and less at an attempt to "restore the correct and full sense of Marx's theory." He is, in fact, explicitly critical of such efforts to "restore pure theory" (see the end of part two in the essay), and it is this shift which marks the ultraradical, historicizing moment in "The Crisis of Marxism." It is also the least developed and most ambiguous aspect of the later essay. To what extent are Marx and Engels themselves responsible for such a development? To what extent does the evolution of a new revolutionary theory imply a synthesis with the old? To what extent does Korsch imply an almost necessarily unmediated split between subjective revolutionary and the science of the laws of capitalism? Does not the decline of political movement imply a dissolution of theory itself? These are just a few of the questions which emerge from this document. Its urgent message is to think historically as Marxists, to understand one's theory as an integral part and expression of concrete political class struggle. Yet the originality and importance of the "Crisis" essay lies precisely in its unresolved antinomies. Where other Marxists assume the unity of theory and praxis, Korsch makes it a focus of exploration. His refusal to dissolve questions into false theoretical syntheses or a mystically postulated praxis is grounded in the recognition that the crisis of Marxism is also the crisis of the proletarian movement itself. Furthermore, he recognizes that a renewal of theory is only possible as generated and circumscribed by a renewal of struggle. That Korsch does not postulate such a renewal makes this document a real expression of crisis.

## Notes

1. Karl Korsch, "Kritisches und Positives zur Frage der Taktik der Kommunistischen Partei," *Neue Zeitung für Großhüringen*, 28 (1924).
2. Karl Korsch, *Der Weg der Komintern* (Berlin, 1926), p. 8.
3. Karl Korsch, *The Present State of the Problem of Marxism and Philosophy* (1930) in: *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday (London, 1970), pp. 89-128.
4. Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 78.

# The Crisis of Marxism - Karl Korsch

*Translated by Otto Koester*

## 1

Marxism today is in the midst of an historical and theoretical crisis. It is not simply a crisis within the Marxist movement, but a crisis of Marxism itself. This crisis reveals itself externally in the complete collapse of the dominant position—partially illusory, but also partially real—that Marxism held during the pre-World War I era in the European working class movement. It reveals itself internally in the transformation of Marxist theory and practice, a transformation which is most immediately apparent in Marxists' altered position vis-à-vis their own national state as well as with respect to the bourgeois system of national states as a whole. It is deceptive and even false to see the theoretical origins of the present crisis as resulting either from a perversion or an oversimplification of Marx's and Engels' revolutionary theory at the hands of their successors. It is equally misleading to juxtapose this degenerated, falsified Marxism to the "pure theory" of Marx and Engels themselves. In the final analysis, today's crisis is the crisis of Marx's and Engels' theory as well. The ideological and doctrinaire separation of "pure theory" from the real historical movement, as well as the further development of theory, is itself an expression of the present crisis.

## 2

The form of Marxism which is currently entering a critical stage was a product of the second half of the nineteenth century. It was created from elements of a theory which was itself formulated under earlier historical conditions, conditions that differed fundamentally from those of the late nineteenth century. These elements were actively incorporated into the working class movement at a time when European capitalism was not yet fully developed. And here is the genesis for the separation of theory from practice inherent in the entire history of Marxism. From its very beginning, this theory is never the "general expression of existing class struggles." Rather, it is the composite result of the class struggles of a previous historical era, and it consequently lacks any real relation to contemporary class struggles emerging as a result of wholly new conditions. In the course of historical development, this separation of theory from practice has widened rather than narrowed. The three contemporary forms of Marxism—"revisionism," "orthodoxy" and the periodic efforts to "restore" original revolutionary Marxism in its pure form—are all based upon this separation. In the final analysis, it is also the source of the present crisis.

## 3

After 1850 the altered historical conditions of the new capitalist epoch and of the working class movement itself prevented the further development of a living Marxist theory within the unfolding praxis of the workers' movement. By the year 1850 the first great cycle in the historical development of capitalism had come to a close. During this cycle and on the basis of its limited capacity at that time, capitalism had completed all stages of its development to the point where the class-conscious sector of the proletariat was in a position to place social revolution on the historical agenda. Thus, on the limited economic basis of that period, the class movement of the proletariat had reached a relatively high level of development. This development found practical expression in the revolutionary struggles of that period, and theoretical expression in the early formulations of the so-called utopian socialists concerning the content of proletarian class consciousness and the goals of the proletarian revolution. It was during this time and in the later development of their theories, which resulted from the experiences of this period, that Marx and Engels arrived at their twofold theoretical achievement. On the one hand, they criticized all aspects of the existing class society (economic basis and superstructure) from the newly acquired perspective of the proletariat. In so doing, they appropriated

unaltered the content of this new proletarian class consciousness directly from the reality of existing class struggles and as it was formulated theoretically by the utopian socialists. Simultaneously, however, they criticized the practice of the proletarian movement as well as the theories of the utopian socialists. Drawing upon the highest achievements of bourgeois science, they were able to conceptualize for the proletarian class the real developmental laws of the existing capitalist society and hence, at the same time, the real conditions for revolutionary class actions. After 1850 and on an expanded basis (geographical, technological, organizational), capitalism began a new historical cycle of its development. Under these altered conditions, it was no longer possible for the proletariat to draw directly upon Marxist theory in its original form, a theory which had assumed its revolutionary character under the conditions of a past historical epoch. During the 1870s—a period of crisis and depression which was particularly conducive to the development of class consciousness—the working class was able to adopt this theory in a formal way. Yet even then it was unable to appropriate completely its revolutionary content—either practically or theoretically.

#### 4

The Marxist theory appropriated by the European workers' movement in the second half of the nineteenth century had partially altered its original revolutionary character during the reception process itself. The materialist view of history grew out of a revolutionary period prior to 1850 as an integral part of the subjective action of a revolutionary class, which continually criticizes in theory and overthrows in practice the false illusions and transient appearances of all existing social relationships. In the succeeding period, it developed into a purely abstract and passive theory dealing with the objective course of social development as determined by external laws. Marxist economy was originally formulated as a radical critique of bourgeois political economy, a critique which was to have found both theoretical and practical culmination in a real revolution. This original schema was later changed by Marx and altered even more by Engels. Today the apologists as well as the critics of Marxism view Marxist economics as little more than a scientific system in which all economic phenomena of bourgeois society are deduced theoretically from an uncritical, axiomatic concept of "value." Marx's revolutionary critique of political economy aimed at the theoretical and practical *Aufhebung* (sublation) of fetishism. But fetishism has become the idol of Marxist scientific economists and a thorn in the side of bourgeois and reformist critics of Marxism. Having been absorbed by the modern working class as mere ideology, Marxist science completely ceased developing as a living theory after the death of Marx, Engels and the first generation of their direct disciples. During this period the leading representatives of revolutionary principles in the Marxist parties were forced to fight a defensive battle against the increasingly dominant trend towards reformist theory and practice. At the same time, they opposed any attempts to revitalize the theoretical expression of proletarian class struggle. Confronted with the threat of bourgeois falsifications of traditional Marxist theory, they tended to view their own stagnation as the lesser of two evils. (See Rosa Luxemburg's article "Stillstand und Fortschritt im Marxismus" ["Stagnation and Progress within Marxism"].) At this time the most important impetus for further developing the theory of proletarian class struggle came from three different directions, each of which consciously and unconsciously stood opposed to orthodox Marxist theory. These three were: unionist reformism, revolutionary syndicalism and Leninist Bolshevism. Despite vast differences, all three shared one common tendency. In one way or another, each attempted to make the subjective action of the working class rather than the objective development of capitalism the main focus of socialist theory. In this regard, all three appear as progressive tendencies within the development of the working class movement and simultaneously as the forerunners of that proletarian class theory and practice which was to develop on a new historical basis.

#### 6

From this overview of the historical origins and determinants of the current Marxist crisis, several conclusions emerge which point to ways for overcoming it. None of the current trends in Marxism stands as an adequate theoretical expression for the continued practical needs of the proletarian class struggle—a struggle which, despite occasional defeat, remains revolutionary in its means and its goals. Certainly so-called "orthodox Marxism" provides the least adequate solution. Of all the contemporary forms of Marxism, this is the most damaging to the progressive development of the proletarian class. After having long since stagnated into ideology, "orthodox Marxism" collapsed as such (Kausky) in its final phase. Today it is nothing but a hindrance blocking the development of the

theory and practice of the proletarian class struggle. The two other trends which are continuations of pre-World War I Marxism are a different matter. From the perspective of the revolutionary proletariat, neither the reformist state socialism of the social democratic parties nor communist anti-imperialism can be written off simply as reactionary movements. The relationship of today's proletariat to the social democratic parties and the Communist Party is virtually identical to the relationship of the proletarian class as a whole to the theory and practice of the radical, progressive bourgeois party at that time in history when the European bourgeois class was still relatively progressive. It is an irrevocable fact of history that during and immediately after World War I, the once revolutionary and anti-statist ideology of social democratic Marxism as it existed in the most powerful core nations of international capitalism- the so-called imperialist nations-was transformed into reformist state socialism. This is analogous to the transformation of revolutionary, anti-statist Christianity into the official religion of the Roman state during the early Middle Ages. On the other hand, there are the struggles taking place in the marginal areas of the international capitalist system, where capitalism has not yet developed locally. The repressed and exploited classes of these areas appear to be developing theories in their current struggles which are contiguous with so-called Communism. These theories cannot take up and continue old Marxism for two reasons: first, the older theory is based on the triumph of capitalism over pre-capitalist socio-economic formations and the advantageous relationship of this stage of history to the proletarian class struggle; and secondly, old Marxism proceeds from the immediate, positive relationship of the bourgeois to the proletarian revolution. In these marginal areas the relationship of the struggles of the proletarian class to those of the indigenous and foreign bourgeoisie is different-not fundamentally, but in its immediate form. These movements cannot seek connections with reformism, since it is inseparably tied to the expansionist and colonialist policies of the core nations of the world capitalist system today. However, they will find in Leninist Bolshevism and Communism a form of Marxist ideology which is strongly anti-imperialist. It could be used as a transitional ideology for their own anti-imperialist class struggle. Such a process would again be analogous to the spread of Christianity among the barbarians outside the territories of the Roman Empire.

## 7

Marxism as an historical phenomenon is a thing of the past. It grew out of the revolutionary class struggles of the first half of the nineteenth century, only to be maintained and re-shaped in the second half of the nineteenth century as the revolutionary ideology of a working class which had not yet regained its revolutionary force. Yet in a more fundamental historical sense, the theory of proletarian revolution, which will develop anew in the next period of history, will be an historical continuation of Marxism. In their revolutionary theory, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels gave the first great summarization of proletarian ideas, in the first revolutionary period of the proletarian class struggle. This theory remains for all time the classical expression of the new revolutionary consciousness of the proletarian class fighting for its own liberation.

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(#5 missing in their original, presumed buried within #4)