

# Is There Marxism After Eastern Europe? A Conversation with a Western Leftist Intellectual

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Translated by David Mandler

As someone who, even as late as at the end of 1989, was required to take an exam on Marxist-Leninist aesthetics at the School of Arts, I must admit that I have always held some rather simplistic notions about Marxism's chances of survival. I thought that once it became clear that social organization based on Marxism is unviable then the whole thing should be forgotten: it was a mistake, gentlemen, so let's take our hats! For, if I recall anything from my studies, it is the dialectic unity of theory and practice. The practice has failed miserably now. But what about the theory? Within Western intellectual circles, it still seems to be blooming. In the spring, when Janos Gyurgyak, the editor-in-chief of the journal *Szazadunk* visited Oxford for three months, he, once again, attended a lecture of the famous Marxist, Gerald Alan Cohen, on Marxist dialectics. I wrote *once again* because he had heard Cohen speak five years earlier. According to Gyurgyak, the elderly professor did not change a single letter in the text of his previous lecture despite the collapse of the Eastern-European regimes in the interim... Marxism's viability in western intellectual life, for example at Oxford University where I have been continuing my studies for a year, was shocking to me as well. For example, a famous/infamous Marxist literary historian by the name of Terry Eagleton—who, as recently as a few years ago wrote that literature should mirror class struggle—has just been appointed to a Chair in the English department. True, he is an astute and highly recognized theoretician, and his appointment was preceded by an intense struggle. While averse to Marxism, I also experienced first hand in England, what for many is a self-evident truth, namely that *leftism*, or classic leftist values are meaningful in a society into which, from the early 80s on, the principle of 'you're worth as much as you earn' was inculcated. But how can the demarcation between leftist cultural and social sensitivities and the political left be shown? And in what ways are leftist values and liberalism connected? What does a young academic from Oxford, Robert J.C. Young, holding a seminar at the English department entitled 'Cultural Differences', say about the popularity of Marxism in the West? (Young, by the way, bears a stunning resemblance to the Hungarian writer Peter Eszterházy—the same curly brown hair, circular glasses, embarrassed hint of a smile; in addition, like other Oxford intellectuals, he can easily be recognized from a distance by his faded jacket).



**Magyar Narancs (M.N.):** It appears that, here in England, Marxism has not been touched a great deal by what has happened in Eastern Europe. For me, this is rather strange. How do you explain it?

**Robert Young (R.Y.):** Western Marxism has had to survive a series of difficulties in the twentieth century. The Russian revolution itself and the activities of socialist governments continually posed problems to Western European intellectuals. Contrary to pre-war illusions, the revelations of Stalin's crimes and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956 caused utter confusion in the ranks of Western leftists. People either gave up their communist sympathies completely or redefined the principles of the Left, as Sartre did in France, or the 'new left' did in England, with the founding of the New Left Review. From 1956 onwards, in the West, *very few intellectuals regarded the Eastern socialist countries as models of Marxism in any sense*. Instead, they desperately tried to find a different model: China mania in the sixties, identification with Cuba and various other places—more or less every possibility except Albania. What happened with Gorbachev and the Eastern European countries was not considered as a failure of the Marxist model but rather as the disintegration of the last empire, belatedly following the fall of the French and British colonial empires a few decades earlier. Of course, the Right in the West used the opportunity to call for the rejection of Marxism in its entirety, but you're right: the views of Marxists have not changed a lot. People have not abandoned Marxism as a result of the events in Eastern Europe.

**M.N.:** This makes the situation clearer. If we declare the realized model to have been unauthentic then one can continue *to believe in the correctness of the theory*. In any case, I don't believe that this position can be very popular in Eastern Europe. It appears that people there want to forget socialism as a nightmare; instead, the apprehension that a radical move to the right will occur seems to be more correct.

**R.Y.:** I don't have any lack of sympathy towards people for rejecting Marxism in Hungary or Poland if by Marxism we mean the kind of governmental policies that they experienced for four decades. This is entirely understandable. I am convinced, though, that Marxism is more than this. *In the West, it has had a long history as a force of political opposition*. Capitalism, in its present form, bears the strong imprint of socialism. There is a vast difference between the social institutions of contemporary Great Britain and the social situation as it existed in the nineteenth century. When Marx and Engels developed their theory, the system was merciless towards the workers. Since then, capitalism has had to adapt to some socialist ideas. It occurred under the pressure of leftist parties, the opposition, or under the indirect threat that one day, the entire country could become communist. In the thirties, the British government barely did anything to relieve unemployment; today, it is paying benefits to two to three million unemployed people. These changes have occurred under the pressures of socialism.

Despite this, if you asked a western Marxist whether or not a Marxist government can be viable in any form, he or she may flinch a bit. It is always more comfortable to push realization into the future. So, this is happening. Marxism has always been utopian. You know, as in religions, hope is in the future and not in the present. And yet, Marxism continues to play an important role in its opposition to capitalism.

**M.N.: Isn't it rather an intellectual game? To imagine how an ideal socialist state would be but refrain from its realization? This, for me, again is proof against the viability of the theory itself.**

**R.Y.:** Yes, certainly, you can say that Western Marxism is an intellectual game, and an alluring game at that because it offers a proper understanding of things based upon simple principles. It invests the intellectual with a feeling of power as it places him or her into a critical position. It allows him or her to comment upon everything from this platform. So, contemporary Marxism can be evaluated in this way—and many do precisely this—but I do not believe its worth to be purely intellectual.

**M.N.: What do you think are the deficiencies of Western Marxism?**

**R.Y.:** First of all, every kind of Marxism is deficient if it sees itself as an inflexible system. Obviously, this was one of the causes of its problems. It must be understood that Marxism is vastly heterogeneous, in reality, the common name of not just a few texts. Just as there are great differences of approaches within the theory, so different Marxist parties fight against each other as much as anyone else does in the world. The other question is Marxism's relationship to problems such as the situation of women, cultural differences, the relationship between the first and the third world etc. The social conditions Marx analyzed in the nineteenth century are in operation today much more with respect to the relationship between western and non-western countries than within the western countries themselves. I have been very critical of Western Marxism in this regard because I think that, concentrating on classic class conditions, it does not acknowledge the needs of differently determined groups, both within the West and outside it.

**M.N.: So, you would not call yourself a Marxist?**

**R.Y.:** I would rather call myself a socialist for the reasons I have just mentioned: I don't regard Marxism as a comprehensive system. It's a space of thought and of inspiration.

**M.N.: It appears that Western-European Marxism is in a double bind: not only is the Word no longer preached in the East, but also the left seems to have less influence in general. Many call the British Labour Party a 'conservative party in disguise', adding that, perhaps, it is because of this that it enjoys greater popularity today; I've heard in a BBC programme that the American Democratic Party, in preparation for the upcoming presidential elections, will re-evaluate its political priorities vis-à-vis blacks, women etc., for they fear that this strategy will lessen their chances of victory. The world appears to be shifting to the right.**

**R.Y.:** Unquestionably, a shift to the right has taken place in England and in the US, and the leftist parties adapted to this by somewhat moving to the right. It is saddening to see how easy it is to move a whole country's ideological disposition. People soon demand things that the governments say. Of this, the best example today is South Africa: after

President De Klerk announced a policy of liberalization in the realm of human rights, suddenly everybody has started to say, ‘yes, we have to give rights to the Africans’. A similar massive about-face was in evidence at the beginning of the eighties with the victory of Thatcher. Everyone started mouthing Thatcher-speak. It was like *1984*.

**M.N.: Is a leftward turn also possible?**

**R.Y.:** I think that a leftward turn already occurred in the late sixties and early seventies when, in certain questions, a consensus existed and entire countries moved towards the left. Let us take a simple example. It was at this time that in Britain comprehensive schooling was introduced, for prior to this, schools were segregated in two ways: for ‘smart children’ and ‘less successful children’. At the time, everyone agreed that this kind of segregation, marking children out for life, was undesirable, and it would be much better if only one type of school existed for everyone. This was precisely one of the things that the government led by Thatcher tried to reverse. In these situations, the intellectuals on the left need to go into action, so—to return—I do not think that they are merely occupying their academic chairs and playing their games. There are so many concrete issues to fight for.

**M.N. So, how would you situate Marxism?**

**R.Y.:** First of all, it’s worth pointing out that if Marxism is dead, as people claim, then there is a striking similarity between Marxism and Capitalism in that both believe that society is determined by the economy. Of course, great differences exist as to how this determining mechanism works with different values and emphases, but ultimately both constitute a fixed idea of Western economo-centrism. Secondly, they should not be seen as two mutually exclusive systems. Even according to Marx, socialism is based upon and develops out of capitalism, which is why it was surprising to see it begin in the economically underdeveloped countries of Russia and Eastern Europe. What caused their failure, perhaps, was the conceptualization of these two systems as mutually exclusive when, clearly, socialism can exist within capitalism, as the case of Sweden shows. Thirdly, just as capitalism has different faces—today’s capitalism is not the same as, say, British colonialism in India—Marxism too can also have various versions. As I said, in the West, it is primarily oppositional. It assumed, however, a new meaning in the former European colonies where, following the departure of an imperialism that had lasted for sometimes two hundred years, socialism, identified with anti-colonial struggle and a new national identity, emerged as the only credible system.

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