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Marcel van der Linden. *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critial Theories and Debates since 1917.* Leiden: Brill, 2007. ix + 380 pp. $139.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-04-15875-7.

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A Fading Tradition

This is a revised, corrected, updated, and expanded version of a work that began as a PhD dissertation and was originally published in Dutch in 1989 and again in German in 1992. Marcel van der Linden, a labor historian at Amsterdam University and executive editor of the *International Review of Social History*, summarizes an extraordinarily broad range of Western Marxist thinkers in an effort to understand how Marxists who were politically independent of the Soviet Union "theoretically interpreted developments in the Soviet Union" (p. 4). Noting that "in the history of ideas Marxist theories have not received the attention they deserve" (p. 2) and that "the 'Russian Question' was an absolutely central problem for Marxism in the twentieth century" (p. 1), van der Linden seeks simultaneously to shed light on both the Soviet experience and "the historical development of Marxist thought" (p. 1), succeeding perhaps more in the latter goal than the former.

The book opens with a brief introduction, which postulates that the development of Western Marxist thinking about the Soviet Union was shaped by three "contextual clusters:" 1) "The general theory of the forms of society (modes of production) and their succession" adopted by differing Marxist thinkers; 2) the changing "perception of stability and dynamism of Western capitalism"; and 3) the various ways "in which the stability and dynamism of Soviet society was perceived" (pp. 5-8). Six chronological chapters summarize debates in, respectively, the years 1917-29, 1929-41, 1941-56, 1956-68, 1968-85, and 1985 to the present. Two brief summary chapters, "In Lieu of a Conclusion" and "Meta-theoretical Note," bring the work to a close.

The scope of van der Linden's coverage is encyclopedic. The lengthy and thorough bibliography covers publications in nine European languages (plus a few in Russian). By my count the book discusses, in varying degrees of detail, nearly eighty different theorists, ranging from the famous, like Karl Kautsky and Leon Trotsky, to obscure members of various sectarian groups and mostly forgotten isolated dissident or academic theoreticians, the recovery of whose work is in itself an impressive and significant contribution to scholarship. The book ably reconstructs long-forgotten debates and–this is not the least of its values–identifies and keeps track of individuals who frequently wrote under pseudonyms, sometimes multiple ones. Among the more notable writers whose work is summarized and critiqued are Kautsky, Paul Levi, Rosa Luxemburg, Anton Pannekoek, Trotsky, Bruno Rizzi, James Burnham, Max Schachtman, C. L. R. James and Raya Dunaevskaya, Cornelius Castoriadis and Claude Lefort, Tony Cliff, Amadeo Bordiga, Isaac Deutscher, Ernest Mandel, Milovan Djilas, Karl Wittfogel, Herbert Marcuse, Paul Mattick, Charles Bettelheim, Paul Sweezy, Rudolf Bahro, Hillel Ticktin, Paresh Chattopadhyay, Eero Loone, and Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff.[1] The book would be valuable were it used only as a reference work in which readers could obtain thumbnail summaries of the ideas developed by the thinkers and debates it covers, although van der Linden seeks and achieves more than this.

But the very encyclopedic quality of the book raises questions of definition. In his introduction van der Linden addresses briefly the thorny problem of determining who can be considered a "Marxist" and what defines the adjective "non-Soviet." With respect to the former, van der Linden partly follows the lead of Howard Bernstein, who distinguished five "core concepts" of Marxism, but he largely circumvents the problem "by regarding all those writers as 'Marxist' who considered themselves as such" (p. 4). His operational definition of "non-Soviet" as "(a) not conforming to the official Soviet ideology, and (b) not regarding the social structure of the Soviet Union either as socialist, or as developing towards socialism" (p. 4), is more problematic, however. It eliminates from con-

sideration a number of thinkers, some within the orbit of official European Communism (especially the Eurocommunist tendency of the 1970s and 1980s) and others from various Left Communist or non-Communist strands of the New Left, who were not uncritical of the Soviet Union but still considered it socialist.[2]

Even within the limits set by van der Linden, however, why some writers are included and others not can be a little puzzling. While Kautsky's debates with Lenin, Trotsky, and Bukharin are rightfully prominent, later Social Democratic theorists are largely ignored, aside from a brief consideration of work by Friedrich Adler and Rudolf Hilferding. Although the book is about Western Marxism, Trotsky deserves a prominent place in the discussion, and he gets one. But the Menshevik emigres were also influential in the West, including in Marxist circles, and their work is totally ignored.[3] Some East European and Soviet dissidents (Djilas, Bahro, the Hungarian 'New Left,' Fritz Behrens, Pavel Campeanu, and the Russian Alexander Zimin) are included, but others (Roy Medvedev, for one) are not. Academic Marxist economists like Resnick and Wolff are discussed, but academic historians who might well be considered Marxists of some sort, like Moshe Lewin or Gabor Rittersporn, are not. The coverage of the Maoist critique is largely limited to the work of Bettelheim, with at most passing reference to admittedly obscure and mostly tendentious publications by orthodox Maoist groups.[4]

It would be churlish, of course, to fault van der Linden for these relatively minor lacunae. Indeed, if there is a problem with his study it is that the very breadth of his survey limits the depth to which he can go in treating complex issues and debates. Some writers are provided more space than others, but none gets more than about a dozen pages in total. Hence none of the thinkers surveyed comes across as much more than a theoretical stick figure. The details of arguments and their empirical basis necessarily get short shrift, as does any sense of style or vibrancy, present certainly in writers like Trotsky, Deutscher, and Ticktin. Readers seeking more in-depth coverage of any given thinker or approach must of necessity look to other works, principally the original sources, many of which are hard to find. And those seeking a lively read and a coherent unfolding narrative will not find it here.

But the book is, after all, a survey, and van der Linden's purpose is less to bring these thinkers to life than to seek out the main intellectual themes that characterized their collective endeavor. He identifies four basic clusters of theories of the nature of Soviet society. First, the theory of state capitalism, formulated initially by the oppositional Bolshevik Gavril Miasnikov, the Austrian Social Democrat Adler, and the German leftist Helmut Wagner, would become most closely associated, in different forms, with Cliff and his followers, Bettelheim and the Maoists, and most recently some academic Marxists like Chattopadhyay and Resnick and Wolff. Second, the theory of the degenerated workers' state was developed by Trotsky and has been defended and periodically modified by his followers in the Fourth International, most thoroughly by the Belgian Mandel. A third theory, bureaucratic collectivism, emerged in the 1930s in the work of the obscure Italian Rizzi and in the work of the Americans Burnham and Schachtman, who broke with Trotsky, the former soon breaking as well with all links to Marxism. The theory was taken in a different direction after WWII by Djilas and the Italians Antonio Carlo and Umberto Melotti. A fourth approach, in which the Soviet Union was considered as an entirely new mode of production, emerged cautiously in the 1940s and gained credence after Wittfogel revived Marx's undeveloped notion of an Asiatic mode of production in the 1950s. More recently Ticktin and his followers, as well as some east European dissidents, moved in this direction, although without reliance on the Asiatic mode. To be sure, each of these theoretical approaches has room for considerable disagreement and difference; these are carefully, if inevitably a bit sketchily, described by van der Linden. In general, van der Linden argues convincingly that these Marxist critics steadily moved away from the orthodox Marxist notion of unlinear historical development from slavery to feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism, recognizing the possibilities of historic reversals, byways, dead ends, and alternate pathways.

Van der Linden devotes most of his work to a presentation of the ideas of each thinker in relation to the others, often using extensive quotations. On the basis of both his account and my own reading of some of these writers it must be said that certain features are striking about the literature he surveys. For one thing, it is remarkable how "economistic" and abstract this literature is. Nearly all these writers use economic and class categories in highly schematic ways. Workers, peasants, and, most importantly, "the bureaucracy" are rarely given meaningful empirical substance. Indeed, the concept of bureaucracy, critical to all four theories, appears to be used remarkably uncritically and often sloppily by nearly all those surveyed. Although the idea of bureaucracy is not absent from Marx, its theoretical development is more associated with Max Weber, who offered the most thorough definition of the phenomenon, and

Robert Michels, who first applied it to the development of socialist political movements. Yet it would seem that few of these writers employ the term in any theoretically specific manner, nor do they really make clear what they mean by bureaucracy or do much of an effective job of identifying the bureaucrats.

Similarly, it would seem that much of this literature is remarkably apolitical. By this I mean that little reference is made in it to the role of political culture and tradition and to political issues in the shaping of socioeconomic reality. So, for example, there is little discussion in this literature of such developments as the political and cultural "great retreat" of the 1930s and the surprisingly powerful influence on Soviet Communism of tsarist practices, traditions, and modes of functioning. Even more striking is the absence, both in van der Linden's account and in most of the literature he surveys, of reference to "the national question." The multinational character of the Soviet Union, the relationship between the "national liberation" of the minority nationalities and both socialism and Russian nationalism, and the relationship of Russian nationalism itself to the Soviet project are concerns that appear totally absent from the Marxist discussion of Soviet society. To be sure, non-Marxist historians and scholars of the Soviet experience have themselves only recently come to fully recognize the critical role played by nationality in the shaping of the Soviet experience. But Marxism was no stranger to the problems posed by national differences for socialism. Indeed, as much as any other issue it was the "national question" (as it was then called) that most engaged Marxist theorists and had the greatest potential to divide them on the eve of the Russian Revolution.[5] Hence the absence of this critical issue from the analyses of those surveyed in this book is all the more remarkable.

Most notable, however, is a stunning lack of genuine historical perspective in much of this literature. To be sure, nearly all the writers surveyed here find it essential to explain to some degree how the revolution of 1917 "went wrong" and to designate one or more key turning points on the path to something other than genuine socialism. Not surprisingly, this is especially true of works from the 1920s and 1930s. Trotsky and his followers, of course, identify the turning point with the coming to power of Stalin. The Maoists identify it with Nikita Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin, although Bettelheim would eventually conclude that the Soviet Union had never been socialist at all. Several other writers, for example Resnick and Wolff, agree with this latter conclusion. However, most of these writers are less concerned with explaining how the Soviet Union came to be what it became than they are in pigeonholing how what it became should be defined. Noticeably absent from most of this literature is a sense of explanation (even theorization) through narrative, which is odd since some of the greatest works of Marxist explanation take a narrative form, for example, Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* (1931-33) and, of course, Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852). In essence, the approach is overwhelmingly more synchronic than diachronic. Hence too many of these theories seem overly schematic and frozen in time at the moment of conception, denying possibilities of further change and development in a most un-Marxian manner.

With the exception of Maoism, which makes the distinction in a rather bizarre way, few of the writers surveyed really distinguish Soviet society under Stalin from Soviet society under his successors. Yet that distinction is a critical one. The post-Stalin Soviet state may have been neither the Marxist utopia nor a desirable society by Western standards, but it no longer terrorized its own people (or most of their leaders) and until the 1980s it provided a steadily improving standard of living. By the Brezhnev years Soviet Russia had been transformed from a peasant society into an urban one, an achievement with substantial implications for the socioeconomic system. By its very nature Marxism is a *critical* theory, so it is hardly surprising to find that Marxists who have looked honestly at the Soviet experience have done so with highly critical eyes. But, at the same time, it would be a distortion of history not to look as well at what in a famous textbook from the 1960s J. P. Nettl called "the Soviet achievement."[6] As van der Linden notes, some of the Marxist theoreticians recognize that the Soviet regime "constituted a *modernisation dictatorship*" (p. 318). But few seem to have recognized the complex implications of this observation.

In his summary chapter, "In Lieu of a Conclusion," van der Linden catalogs and summarizes the main features of the Western Marxist conversation about the Soviet experience and also offers some findings of his own. He concludes, convincingly I believe, "that all 'classical' variants [of the Marxist interpretation of the Soviet Union] conflict in essential respects with Marx's own theory, and, in addition, occasionally run counter to the facts or violate logical principles" (p. 310). It is, he continues, "perfectly clear that Soviet society can hardly be explained in orthodox-Marxian terms at all. If it is accepted that the USSR was not communist in a Marxian sense, the analysis becomes almost impossible: which categories should one use to analyse a society in which oppression and exploitation exist, but in which no ruling

class in the strict sense (whether the working class, bourgeoisie or collective bureaucracy) can be identified? In which, as a consequence, no logical social and economic dynamic can be recognised?" (p. 317).

Yet if this be the case does the fading tradition of Marxist analysis surveyed here retain some value?- Why should anyone bother to read or even know about these writers? Van der Linden says this remains a worthwhile endeavor, identifying eleven distinct "subtheoretical themes or *topoi*" (p. 318) of value in the works he has surveyed. As historians begin to approach the Soviet experience as something that has happened and not something that is happening, much of the literature discussed in this book will appear increasingly quaint. But these works are still of some utility for comprehending what took place in the former Russian Empire from 1917 to 1991. More importantly, they themselves help document the intellectual and social history of the twentieth century. For van der Linden is correct that non-Soviet Marxism, in all its increasingly myriad forms, played an inadequately studied but important role in twentieth-century thought. It is the virtue of his thoroughly researched book to help bring that role back onto the stage, where it may be more effectively appreciated and recovered.

Notes

[1]. I previously reviewed Resnick and Wolff's *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the USSR* for H-Russia. See Henry Reichman. "Marxism and Soviet History: Review of Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff, *Class Theory and History: Capitalism and Communism in the U.S.S.R.*," H-Russia, H-Net Reviews, November, 2004. URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10019.

[2]. I am thinking in particular of the Il Manifesto group in Italy. Although the bibliography includes an article (in German) by Rossana Rossanda, an important member of this group, it is not discussed in the text.

[3]. In fairness to van der Linden, the Mensheviks' views have already been ably chronicled in Andre Liebich, *From the Other Shore: Russian Social Democracy after 1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[4]. Although I long ago abandoned the political affiliations as well as the views and assumptions underlying the Maoist approach, in the 1970s I was a part of the debates on Soviet society that absorbed the U.S. Maoist movement during the late Cultural Revolution. Van der Linden briefly mentions Martin Nicolaus's 1975 *Restoration of Capitalism in the USSR*, and his bibliography includes a 1974 publication by the Revolutionary Union (later Revolutionary Communist Party [RCP]), *How Capitalism Has Been Restored in the Soviet Union and What This Means for the World Struggle*, of which I was a principal writer, but he does not discuss them substantively. Yet these works developed contradictory theories of "state capitalism" that were of some sophistication and relevance to the themes of van der Linden's study. The differences were articulated most fully perhaps in a polemical article, "Social-Imperialism and Social-Democracy, Cover-Up of Capitalism in the USSR (or How Martin Nicolaus and the October League Have 'Restored' Socialism in the Soviet Union)," published in the RCP's theoretical journal *The Communist*, no. 1 (October 1976), which I authored under a pseudonym. The RCP also offered a more comradely critique of Bettelheim's response to the fall of the Gang of Four in China in "China, The Dictatorship of the Proletariat and Professor Bettelheim (or How *Not* to Criticize Revisionism)," *The Communist*, no. 5 (May 1979), which I also authored. This article commented on the debate on Soviet society between Bettelheim and Paul Sweezy, discussed by van der Linden. Seen in retrospect, these works are crudely polemical, willfully sectarian, and almost medieval in their nitpicking scholasticism, characteristics they share with more than a few of the other works surveyed by van der Linden. However, they do articulate issues in the "state capitalist" approach that are of interest for anyone seeking to grapple with the Marxist intellectual journey in the twentieth century. I should also add that van der Linden's citation of Al Szymanski's *Is the Red Flag Flying? The Political Economy of the Soviet Union Today* (London: Zed Press, 1979) as Maoist is incorrect. Although sympathetic to Mao's China at the time, Szymanski rejected the Maoist theory of capitalist restoration.

[5]. Horace B. Davis, *Nationalism and Socialism: Marxist and Labor Theories of Nationalism to 1917* (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1967). Interestingly, van der Linden's very first footnote declares that "The terms 'Russia' and 'the Soviet Union' are here and there used interchangeably in this study for stylistic reasons" (p. 1).

[6]. J. P. Nettl, *The Soviet Achievement* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1967).

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