

# H-Net Reviews

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Enzo Traverso. *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 312 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-17942-3.

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## Left Nostalgia

Marxists in the United States and Europe often claim it is easier for people to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. As Enzo Traverso describes in the opening moments of *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, the collapse of “actually existing” socialism symbolized by the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the hegemonic consolidation of neoliberalism has rendered the idea of a socialist alternative to the present order anachronistic, a utopian holdover from another era best placed in a museum to collect dust. Marxists have been mourning. Traverso captures such feelings succinctly: “new collective hopes have not yet risen above the horizon. Melancholy still floats in the air as the dominant feeling of a world burdened with its past, without a visible future” (pp. 18-19). He argues, however, that such melancholia has always been a feature of leftist thought and that it can be generative: melancholy has prompted revolutionary movements, stirring leftists to try to redeem those that struggled and failed before them. Though his discussion is sprawling at times, Traverso persuasively argues through close readings of philosophical, political, and artistic material that the Left could overcome the current impasse if Marxists recover a dialectical understanding of loss and melancholy. Coming at a moment when the Left appears on the rise, Traverso’s work is timely and valuable. It is a helpful contribution to contemporary Marxist theory likely useful to scholars of and on the Left, as well as to contemporary radicals committed to the project of social and socialist transformation.

Traverso’s first two chapters lay out his theoretical framework. Chapter 1 explicates his central premise that Marxists have historically and dialectically incorporated defeat and loss into their vision of liberation. His argument here rests on his understanding of “the vanquished” as a historical category and the sense of melancholy attached to their memory. He defines “the vanquished” as those that have been defeated, but whose experience can and should be redeemed. For Traverso, they occupy a privileged position in Marxist history. As he notes, “the history of socialism is a constellation of defeats.” Rather than engendering defeatism, this history has “consolidated and legitimated” Marxism’s “ideas and aspirations” (p. 22). Attending to the experience of the vanquished cultivates a critical perspective that bears revolutionary potential, as it pushes those in the present to redeem struggles of the past. The memory of past struggles can point to future possibilities, meaning the melancholia associated with loss can be politically generative. Explorations of this “dialectic of defeat” appear in the writings of Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg, and Walter Benjamin, as well as in the twentieth century’s revolutionary iconography (p. 31). Traverso writes: “We might easily extract from Marx’s (and Marxists’) writings on revolution—as a kind of subtext—a theory of defeat that is an attempt at exorcism” (pp. 32-33). As he argues in his second chapter, the pledge to remember this theory infuses its animating principles: “Marxist teleology implied remembrance as a key element of its utopian imagination” (p. 72). Traverso suggests that while this Marxist mode of

remembering has faded under the pressures of neoliberalism, it could be revived, enabling the melancholic to once again stir revolutionary hopes.

The remaining five chapters sketch the contours of left melancholy across the twentieth and early twenty-first century. Chapter 3 explores leftist cinema, arguing that filmmakers like Gillo Pontecorvo have long explored the Marxist “dialectic of defeat,” pointing toward socialist victory through their depiction of failed struggle. After 1989, leftist filmmakers like Theo Angelopoulos, Chris Marker, Ken Loach, and Carmen Castillo commemorated the memory of communism, creating works that testify to lost possibilities and provide emotional links to a past where socialist transformation still seemed possible. Chapter 4 considers Marxist writings on bohemian subcultures, exploring the way Marx, Gustave Courbet, Benjamin, and Leon Trotsky suggest that fringe groups of artists and outsiders create repositories of melancholy possibility. Chapter 5 considers the melancholic aspects of Marxists’ frequent failure to overcome their European horizons, mourning lost opportunities for connection between Western Marxism and black Marxism. For instance, Traverso explores the ways C. L. R. James and Theodor Adorno similarly diagnosed Western civilization’s self-destructive rationality, a shared focus that unfortunately did not translate into collaboration. Chapter 6 focuses on the relationship between Benjamin and Adorno, suggesting that their correspondence and friendship embodied “a melancholic constellation” (p. 178). Chapter 7 once again turns to Benjamin, this time through the work of French Marxist Daniel Bensaid, who formulated a melancholic vision of revolution and utopia through the German writer’s work.

*Left-Wing Melancholia*’s breadth is impressive, almost intimidating. Traverso’s definition of leftist cul-

ture is expansive: his preface describes it as “a combination of theories and experiences, ideas and feelings, passions and utopias” (p. xiii). This broad approach lets him deftly weave together a broad array of material to recast Marxism’s history, asking readers to look at familiar figures in new ways. His treatment of Benjamin stands out in this regard. He is an almost constant presence throughout Traverso’s book, serving in many ways as his archetypal melancholic Marxist. Foregrounding Benjamin’s melancholia and connecting it directly to his politics is a provocative and generative move. The work’s broad scope, however, also threatens its cohesiveness. At times, this work feels like a collection of thematically similar essays rather than a focused monograph. Many of the chapters have appeared elsewhere, though in different form.

Traverso’s work asks contemporary scholars of and on the Left to reckon with the ways they remember Marxism’s history of defeat. His work might be read as an implicit critique of the pessimistic tendency he identifies among leftists today: while he acknowledges the challenges the Left faces under the auspices of neoliberalism, the vanquished of today can be redeemed, resuscitating the utopian hopes that have long stirred radicals and revolutionaries. This serves as a call to historians and theorists of Marxism to consider whether they place their objects of study in the tradition of the vanquished, asking whether or not they mourn with an eye toward redemption. Such a critical turn seems appropriate given the recent visibility of avowedly democratic socialist figures and groups in the United States and United Kingdom, as well as the prominence of radical left coalitions like Syriza in Greece. It seems that activists and organizers have already begun remembering in the terms Traverso suggests, working through melancholy to redeem those that neoliberalism is vanquishing.

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