

The Critique of Marxism and the Criticism of Religion

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WARREN S. GOLDSTEIN, OCT 18 2010

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, like Zarathustra's proclamation of "the death of God," the Western news media announced "the death of communism." While ossified empires and economic systems collapse, ideas do not die so quickly. Attempts to kill ideas by persecuting their followers have historically only lead to greater zealotry. The more clever strategy has been to make it "unfashionable."

Marxism and Communism have done better as social movements than as parties in power. As movements, they have been able to excite and galvanize the opposition. As parties in power, they have resorted to terror and dictatorship to stay in power. When they have been democratic, they have been overthrown by the capitalist powers. The only communist regimes, which have successfully survived, are those, which have become capitalist. Since the collapse of communism in the East, the left in the West has also died along with it. Those who have chosen social democracy and reformism have increasingly become institutionalized and centrist so much that they are indistinguishable from the powers that be.

Marxism has served as a kind of "alter ego" of modern capitalism. As long as capitalism has continued to grow and evolve, Marxism has been there to provide a critique of it. In order for capitalism to wipe out Marxism, it would first have to destroy itself. Then Marxists would have nothing about which to write. Or would they? Despite its vicissitudes, capitalism does not seem to be going away anytime soon. Its socially and environmentally destructive tendencies are only outmatched by its adaptability and tremendously productive capacities. The belief that civilization is on the verge of collapse (à la Žižek) echoes of hopes in the eschatological end of times. Neither the Messiah nor the Revolution has come. Belief in the apocalypse is based on a combination of anxiety and wishful thinking. More likely is that "the crisis of crisis management" will be managed. As much profit can be made out of helping the environment as in destroying it. Or, first we make money by destroying the environment so we can then make money by saving it.

In an Orwellian logic, if we do not have an enemy we would have to create one. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, neo-conservative Samuel Huntington was all too eager but to point the way. For the right wing in the Judeo-Christian West, the new enemy is Islam. Arms contractors, oil companies, (along with Halliburton, Bechtel and Blackwater) have been all too eager but to get it on what has mounted to a low grade endless wars- wars that cannot be won and which we do not want to win- on fear that we will lose our contracts. War is more profitable than peace. The underlying logic of the Obama administration is that the way to keep the military-industrial complex quiet (that is for the Democrats to have their support) is to keep them busy. If there is a desire to end a war due to its political and financial costs, it is only to free up resources for the next one.

The Socialist, Communist, and Anarchist movements in the 19th and 20th century have not simply waned because of the collapse of the Soviet system; they have declined due to their own orthodoxy. Historical materialism and critical theory should be a living breathing framework, which constantly has to renew and modify itself to address changing conditions on the ground. In order for it to do so, it must engage in self-critique. Marx, wrote that "the premise of all criticism is the criticism of religion." Conservative critics have accused Marxism of being a secular religion- a secularization of Judeo-Christian Messianism. This poses a paradox. On the one hand, it has provided hope in something better. On the other hand, it has been delusional. Rather than denying this, historical materialism must critique the theological residues within it so that it can once more become a vibrant social science. Only when this

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occurs, can it provide a truly critical understanding of existing social conditions and thereby provide any chance on making them better.

One thing that a Marxist, historical materialist or a critical framework can provide is a better understanding of religion. There is a tendency of many social scientists to avoid dialectical frameworks for understanding social reality because of its political associations. Any association with Marxism gives most social scientists *Unbehagen*. Marx did not invent dialectics nor was he the first to apply it to history, but he was the first to do it in a materialist manner, that is, supposedly devoid of theology. The roots of dialectics go back beyond Hegel and Kant to Plato and Aristotle. Dialectical frameworks still provide a useful tool in understanding the dynamics of historical processes. One of these dialectical frameworks is class analyses. However, it too often applied in a rigid manner. There are never just two classes but more complex divisions, subdivisions, and overlapping boundaries. Class is only one line along which conflict takes place. There others including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Many of these conflicts have an economic basis. Neither Marx nor the Frankfurt School was the first to be critical. Preceding them were the Young Hegelians and Immanuel Kant. To be critical is not simply to negate but it stems from the desire to make things better.

There is a tendency for most analyses of religion in the last few decades to engage in an empathetic understanding. While affirming freedom of belief and religious pluralism, we should not be afraid to criticize it. Religious beliefs need to be crosschecked with their relation to reality- whether literalist interpretations of the Bible, terrorism in the name of Jihad, or the delusions of the end of times. Individuals must have the right to religious freedom but we must challenge religious ignorance, Thanatos, and lack of self-reflection.

To understand the religious conflicts in the modern world, we need to use a critical framework, which selectively appropriates elements from its intellectual past. The framework is self-reflective; critique turns back in on itself. Through critique, we can reach higher levels of understanding. Religious conflict is a process of interaction, and like all interaction, it has a dynamic. The pattern is not a cycle or a pendulum but rather a spiral (a dialectic). There is a tendency of sectarian religious movements to become institutionalized into churches. Social movements, if they survive, become institutionalized into NGOs or political parties. These institutions become increasingly ossified only to give rise to the need for new religious and secular movements. In the sphere of religion, the process with its periodic "revivals and routinization" is a dialectical one of religious rationalization and secularization.

Critical theory needs to reevaluate its relationship to positivistic social sciences. It should make use of all methodologies available to it including quantitative, qualitative, and historical methods. A critical approach to religion will not be likely to attract institutional funding. Religious institutions and religious sympathetic foundations, especially conservative ones, are likely to be uninterested or even hostile. This is the problem of the left. Unlike our conservative and mainstream counterparts, we do not have much of an economic base. This, however, should not stop us. A critical approach to religion will help us better understand not only the roots of religious conflict, but also how it unfolds. It may help us make better sense of the religious right, of fundamentalisms and orthodoxies of all kinds, which stand in the way of progressive social change.

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