

Review – Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism

Written by Raju J. Das

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Routledge Handbook of Marxism and Post-Marxism

By Alex Callinicos, Stathis Kouvelakis and Lucia Pradella

Routledge, 2021

The Handbook explores the development of Marxism and Post-Marxism, setting them in dialogue. It is a response to a conjuncture that is defined by a number of features: the emergence of post-Marxism; the continuing vitality of Marxism, and indeed its renewal in the hands of both established scholars and a younger generation; anti-capitalist protests since Seattle in 1999; and the 2007 economic crisis which has generated fears in the minds of policy makers about the return of communism and Marxism.

Apart from an immensely informative editorial introduction by three distinguished Marxists, Alex Callinicos, Lucia Pradella and Stathis Kouvelakis, the Handbook has nine parts. Each part contains several short chapters. Part 1 and part 3 provide the 'Foundations', i.e. foundational ideas of Marx and Engels in part 1, and of other Marxists (Trotsky, Bordiga, Gramsci, Lukacs, and Frankfurt school theorists) in part 3.

Part 2 highlights the contributions of Kautsky and Luxemburg who extend Marx's and Engels' ideas about the world-market. Part 4 presents exemplars of Marxism outside of Europe. Lenin is included here, in addition to Mao, Mariategui, Fanon and CLR James. Titled "Renewal and Dispersal", part 5 includes discussions on: Althusser, Amin, Bensaid, Cohen, Hobsbawm, Jameson, Poulantzas, Sartre, Tronti and Wallerstein. Part 6 contains chapters on Post-Marxism, including that of Badiou, Negri, Laclau and Mouffe, Habermas, and Guha. Part 7 explores the 'unexplored territories', the areas that Marxism is accused of neglecting (such as gender and race relations, and ecology). The reader learns about Davis, Vogel, Hall, Butler, Mohanty, and ecological Marxists, as well as Spivak's view on Marx. Part 8 unpacks ideas about the hidden abode of production, as studied by Harvey, Marini, Uno, Braverman, Grossman, Sweezy, and Rubin, and part 9 includes a timely discussion on Covid-19.

Historical Geography of Marxism

The Handbook innovatively presents the history, and indeed, the historical geography, of Marxism in terms of its rendezvous with workers' movements. There have been four. The first occurred in the late 19th century with the emergence of mass socialist parties and the popularisation of Marxism as the most systematic version of socialist ideology, which was, of course, challenged by Bernstein's reformism. The second rendezvous followed the 1917 Russian Revolution, and the associated polarisation of the labour movement between revolutionary and social-democratic factions. The third rendezvous was between the new Communist movement and national liberation struggles. The fourth occurred in 1968 between a revolutionary left that was critical of both official Communism and social democracy, and a wave of working-class insurgency. During this stage, which was known for workers' strikes but also non-class movements, Marxist work included not only critical reflections on Trotsky by the likes of Cliff, but also the work of Sartre and workerism. This was also when post-isms developed, including the Gramsci-inspired subaltern studies from South Asia. Since the workers' movement was crushed by Thatcher and Reagan, there have been no signs of a new rendezvous with the workers' movement in the last five decades of neoliberalism, so Marxism

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is now largely confined to academia.

The Handbook is praise-worthy for plenty of reasons. It presents a great version of the Who's Who of Marxism. It is an interdisciplinary undertaking. It is also an international project: it contains a wide range of scholars, from within Europe and outside. It shows that many good ideas have come from the Global South, some of which, as Prashad eloquently shows, connect the past traditions of 'primitive socialism' to contemporary people's struggles (p.167). The Handbook also gives space to new versions of Marxism. These include not only ecological Marxism (p.443) ably discussed by Royle, but also 'spatial Marxism' inspired by Harvey and developed in 'university departments of geography and urban studies' (p.347).

The editors counter the view that 'Marx is alive but Marxism is dead' (p.335) or that both Marx and Marxism are *passé*, by saying that 'capitalism and Marxism are bound together as eternal antagonists', as economic crisis, etc. suggest (p.17). Yet, in spite of the severest economic crisis, the working class has remained rather quiet. They present interesting questions for critical reflections:

has the neoliberal transformation of capitalism so atomized the working class and weakened its organizations that it has lost its capacity to act as a collective subject? ... Or is capitalism so reconfiguring social relations that resistance will take qualitatively different forms that no longer have a recognizable resemblance to the working class in its traditional forms? Or, finally, was the very idea of class subjectivity, of economic antagonisms acting as the basis of collective political action always a mistake? (p.20)

Figuring out which is the correct one, as they rightly note, is 'a matter of the shape taken by future social and political struggles' (p.20). The Handbook is an excellent intellectual map of global Marxism. If you wish to quickly have a sound idea about how Marxists think about the world, this Handbook is handy.

Marxism or Post-Marxism?

However, I have several comradely criticisms of it, all of which revolve around one question: what is Marxism? The editors (and many contributors) see Marxism as a body of work that a) presents a critique 'of the ideological representations of capitalism offered by its intellectual apologists, and of the economic system that these simultaneously present and conceal' (p.17), and b) has an organic connection with the workers' movement. This conceptualisation is laudable but inadequate. To be a Marxist, it is not enough to critique the extant class-society or to advocate class-struggle. An *additional* criterion is necessary: 'Only he [or she] is a Marxist who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*' (Lenin 1977a, p.35; italics in original). The editors, or the Handbook as such, do not appear to make the case for the revolutionary conquest of state power. I could not therefore help asking: where do the editors stand in relation to the contrast between classical Marxism, or what I would call MELLT Marxism (the Marxism developed by Marx, Engels and Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky, and their followers) and what Deutscher calls 'pseudo-Marxism of ... social-democrats, reformists, Stalinists' etc. (p.10)? The editors tend to blur the boundary between the two main forms of Marxism.

In a class-society where ideas and class interests are connected, it is important to take sides in 'ideological class struggle', which involves 'factional disputes and a strict differentiation between shades of opinion' (Lenin, 1977b, 109). This principle is not evident. The editors claim that, 'as time has passed, the boundary between Marxism and Post-Marxism has become more blurred' (p.1) and that 'it is hard to draw a dividing line between the two strands of thought' (p.18). They also say that 'not only the origins but also the future of these [two] currents of thought are in fact closely interdependent' (p.2). Such a view has made them include Post-Marxism in the Handbook at the expense of numerous Marxists who had to be omitted because of lack of space. They justify their claim on the ground that 'some important contemporary Marxist theorists have themselves drawn heavily on poststructuralism' and that some Post-Marxists have moved back toward Marxism (p.1). So, can one be a Marxist and still 'draw *heavily* on poststructuralism' (p.1; italics added)? Doesn't the law of the transformation of quantitative change into qualitative change apply here? If there are 'ambiguities expressed even by as strong-minded figures as Badiou and Negri as to how to position themselves with respect to these two lines of thought' (p.14), shouldn't one conclude that the problem lies with their thinking, and not with Marxism?

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Marxism represents the most advanced level of class consciousness. Just because someone criticises Marxism or stops being a Marxist does not mean there is a crisis of Marxism itself, any more than a few workers becoming capitalists means that there are *no* class boundaries. Marxism is not the sum of the consciousness of *individual* Marxists. The editors' view of Marxism and its so-called crises is an individual-centric view.

The editors say that 'Marxism can no longer claim to have, as it did for much of the 20th century, the monopoly of critical thought' (p.18). This implies that Marxism, to the editors, is a *form* of critical thought, or 'oppositional criticism', a social-democratic 'safety valve for mass dissatisfaction, a condition of the stability of the social structure' (Trotsky, 2008, xvi). In the afterword, Callinicos says: '[w]e trust that this Handbook has established the intellectual and political richness of the Marxist tradition *and* its Post-Marxist offshoots' (p.559; italics added). A correct claim about the richness of Marxism is here incorrectly applied to Post-Marxism.

The editors say that 'Marxist work develops in competition and/or dialogue with Post-Marxism' (p.18). For there to be a dialogue, there has to be a common ground. But is there *significant* common ground? Post-Marxism says no to key tenets of Marxism: class, class struggle, the working class, proletarian revolution, objectivity, etc. Yet, the editors unacceptably affirm the necessity for a dialogue between it and Marxism. What will come out of it? What will Marxism gain from its 'ex'? Must Marxism, the embodiment of the highest level of class consciousness, come down to the level of post-Marxist consciousness, the consciousness of liberal/left-liberal men and women?

Relying on Spivak, the editors say: 'the relationship between Marxism and post-colonialism [an offshoot of post-structuralism that is behind the emergence of post-Marxism] isn't necessarily a conflictual one' (p.16). They credit Spivak for her defence of Marx against the Foucaults, and say that 'In Spivak's thought, Marxism, deconstruction, post-colonialism and feminism can play off each other productively' (p.16). This is said about the same Spivak who, in her own chapter, makes a blatantly anti-Marxist claim: 'the agent of production of the social today is the citizen rather than the wage-worker as such' (p.401). Spivak has elsewhere said: 'Marx is not talking about the non-generation [i.e. non-production] of capital but the non-utilisation of capital for capitalism', so people should 'agree to the production of capital' but make sure that 'it can't be appropriated by one group of people' (Spivak 1996, p.213). This not only smacks of intellectual ignorance about Marx's *Capital*. This is also plainly social-democratic, the politics of Post-Marxism. On the whole, the editors, unfortunately, fail to defend the distinctive superiority of Marxism over all current bodies of 'critical' thought.

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