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Academic Marxism in the Crosshairs: What is at Stake in the U.S.?

Abstract

This essay considers the nature of attacks on academic Marxism in North America, still the center of capitalist power worldwide. Its main aim is to reflect on what is at stake in the surge of anti-Marxism associated with the right, specifically relating to the academy. While the far left poses little threat to the core of liberal capitalist power in the state and economy (and if anything is helping “do work” for the centre against the far right), the far right has made Marxism, especially academic Marxism, a core target and framing for its battle against liberal power and the left. What potential political implications might there be for the Marxist left of ongoing attacks and of further threats in formation in North America?

Keywords

Marxism, Academia

Cover Page Footnote

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In recent decades the Marxist left has been, with exceptions, a relatively weak force at multiple scales, from local to global. In contrast, the world has witnessed the growth and strengthening of right-wing movements across the global South and North. One of the key anchors in these times for the Marxist left, in the absence of burgeoning socialist parties and international movements, is academic Marxism. Through it, theory and knowledge are generated that not only provides continuity and development for the Marxist-oriented left more broadly, but also analysis and ideas that could be relevant to class struggle into the future.

Recently, especially in the global South (but also Eastern Europe), left-oriented academia has come under severe attack in countries like India (see the essays by Raju Das and Hyun Ok Park). Marxist scholars have often been at the centre of such aggression. Increasingly the potential for such attacks is becoming an issue in the global North. Rightist movements in North America and Europe typically contend that at the heart of the political orientation of youth in their societies that they find abhorrent (associated not just with so-called “wokism” but also the belief that socialism ought to replace capitalism) is the domination in universities of Marxism, supported by Marxist-influenced scholars of critical theoretical orientation and even, unknowingly, many progressive liberals.

Meaningful documentation of attacks (from censorship to dismissal and prison) and attempts to contend with these actions against global South scholars has started to appear, associated with efforts such as Scholars at Risk. What is mostly still absent is analysis of what this means for not just academic Marxism but, more broadly, the struggle for socialism and the fate of left movements in specific national contexts (as the papers by Das and Park touch on).

From an international, rather than national, perspective, the US dominated capitalist order is center-liberal oriented. This is an order within which academic Marxism is tolerated. While the post-1960s history of the cold war suggests such toleration should maintain under this liberal orientation – though should the left become a much stronger force this toleration might weaken. Notwithstanding, the more immediate challenge is the right. Should the far right take and remain in power in the US, Canada, and more widely in Europe there is a risk that academic Marxism (held responsible, as this essay will try to show, for so much of what the right hates) will come under far more serious pressure in the global North, and perhaps additional pressure in the global South given the influence of the global capitalist order worldwide. Would an already weak Marxist left that would no longer have an anchor in academic Marxism, face further debilitation?

This essay considers the nature of attacks on academic Marxism in North America, still the center of capitalist power worldwide. Its main aim is to reflect on what is at stake in the surge of anti-Marxism associated with the right, specifically relating to the academy. While the far left poses little threat to the core of liberal capitalist power in the state and economy (and if anything is helping “do work” for the centre against the far right), the far right has made Marxism, especially academic Marxism, a core target and framing for its battle against liberal power and the left. What potential political implications might there be for the Marxist left of ongoing attacks and of further threats in formation in North America?

Historical Context

At approximately the midpoint of his 1974 work, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, Perry Anderson boldly proclaims:

After the end of the Second World War, however, Marxist theory had migrated virtually completely into the universities - precincts at once of refuge and exile from the political struggles in the world outside. In this period, Lukacs, Lefebvre, Goldmann, Korsch, Marcuse, Della Volpe, Adorno, Colletti and Althusser all occupied university posts of professorial rank; Sartre, rising into a university career, left it after success as a writer. In all cases, the discipline in which chairs were held was philosophy. The external determinants which acted to move the main focus of Marxist theory from economics and politics towards philosophy, and its formal site from party assemblies to academic departments, were inscribed in the somber history of the period (49-50).

Twenty-five years later not only does this pattern hold in the West, if anything it has deepened and extended, most easily apparent in the wide array of disciplines across the social sciences and humanities where Marxist-oriented academics have been present, not just producing theory per se but research of various forms. While no single discipline has become, predominantly, what one might label Marxist, I cannot think of one that has not consistently somewhere and sometime yielded work that counts as Marxist scholarship. At the same time, the significance of the site of “party assemblies” has if anything further evaporated in the face of the surging neoliberal 1980s and end of the soviet world, 1990s. I think it fair to say that the continued life and legacy of Marxism as a body of theory, knowledge, and political possibility relies today in the West, or rather global North, on the survival of Marxism as an approach and orientation within higher education - what is typically labeled academic Marxism. Certainly there are parties, organizations, groups of activists, fully (e.g., the Party for Socialism and Liberation) or substantially (the Democratic Socialists of America) Marxist in nature. There are staff and leadership presence in local government (e.g. mayors in California), a few political representatives at the national level (e.g. Bernie Sanders) and in progressive-oriented institutions such as libraries and such K-12 education. While especially the parties should not be counted out as forces in the development of Marxism today, compared to the parties of the past and what is produced by Marxist academics today, they are still quite limited in this regard.

If this is the case, then the fate of academic Marxism matters for the prospects of Marxism in the West. While no doubt the West is not the only part of the world important for Marxism’s development, history suggests its absence as such would present challenges to that development. Of concern here is specifically North America, and particularly the US, because of its size, power, and centrality within the global capitalist system. For this reason alone, the prospects for significant tendencies toward socialism in the US matter for prospects for socialism worldwide.

Current Developments

There is no single word I am aware of that captures and conveys accurately how to think of Marxism as a history, contemporary presence, and future. But let us settle for the placeholder word “tradition,” understood not only with respect to the passing from one generation to the next but also a movement, and an orientation towards the world. Anchors for the survival of a tradition are important. One might ask if Academic Marxism is a bit like the monasteries of Ireland in the 5th-8th century, helping keep the new religion alive after the force of the Christianized Roman Empire dissolved. There were many Christians in the world at that time but it was the Irish monks through those years that kept the written record intact, developed it, and ultimately facilitated the spread of Christianity to all of Europe.¹

The analogy only goes so far: academic Marxism is not in relatively remote location and the current period is not an interregnum, between two massive historical period, ancient and medieval. Hence, it is vulnerable to political forces. But which ones? After WWII the right (via icon Senator Joseph McCarthy) mobilized along with the US national state security agencies (especially the FBI) to repress individuals, including academics, who had been involved in the surge of communist support notably in the 1930s. The recent film, *Oppenheimer*, depicts aspects of that 1950s persecution.

Today, there is a near absence of any such repression from the national government. It is the right that is the feared enemy. Does the absence of far left repression coming from the main forces of capitalist power stems from neglect of what it deems is a weak force, while the capitalist state is preoccupied with the far right? Or does the left offer a pole of attraction for American youth, contra the right, and is it “doing work” for US liberal capitalist power? I raise these questions, which I cannot address in this essay, to emphasize that while the forces of centrist liberal capitalism are not mobilized against the Marxist left, those of the also pro-capitalist far right are, and we have to wonder what “work” it does for the rightist capitalist camp.

Understanding the benefits for and the nature of the attacks from the right will I believe helps us better understand the political implications overall. In general, central here is the right’s claim that there is a link between the liberal capitalist center and the far left. They are claiming this center is actually far left, either expressly or secretly, either directly intended to be secret or inadvertently so. There are many examples. One that stands out for its strange logic is the widespread claim that is ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) metrics used by corporations are really socialistic and communist² and that global elites tied to the World Economic Forum, the organization advancing ESG, are so oriented. Even a state attorney general (AG Marshall of Alabama) publicly sounded the alarm: “An unelected cabal of global elites is using ESG to hijack our capitalist system, capture corporations, and threaten hard-earned dollars of American workers.”³

¹ The history is complex. See Croinin, 2017. A popularized, and for some controversial, focus on this is Cahill, 1996.

² See <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/article/stakeholder-capitalism-and-esg-the-road-to-socialism>.

³ <https://x.com/GOPoversight/status/1656323751112220672?s=20>.

ESG is geared to corporations. Is it possible for some way to link corporations to Marxism, even Communism? Very simple for the right: the corporations seek to maximize profit and China and its CCP is the way to do that. So, corporations are willing to go along with a communist orientation. Also, while profit goes to the top (like power and wealth in their view goes to socialist party elite in socialism) equity for all in each corporation or workplace applies to the rest of the corporate workers (equity is communism in this view). The communism label is rationalized based on vague resemblances to a focus on community and care, challenging the values of individualism, family, God, and nation. EDI, (equity, diversity, inclusion) is even more condemnable for the right. Equity in this view means equality of outcome, seen as communistic. As one influencer wrote: “Remember, ‘Equality ’means equal treatment “under the law and ‘Equity ’means everyone is made to be equal, by law. That’s communism”⁴

It is also about global corporations controlling economies. The brand Bud Light, of recently controversy regarding a trans spokesperson, is owned by Anheuser-Busch, which in turn is owned by a Belgium corporation. They are seen as seeking a system of total stability within which they can profit. Behind it is the massive financial firm Black Rock and the WEF. For many rightist figures, corporations are penetrated by or even run by “Cultural Marxists:” Walmart, Amazon, Apple, CVS, Berkshire, Exxon Mobile, Alphabet (Google) and of course Disney.⁵ The concept even made its way into the Trump administration (Heer, 2017). In all this, the right can hold its commitment to capitalism by distinguishing these global corporations from the smaller, local, or national ones: that is, the real capitalism.

I mention corporations per se especially to illustrate how the right identifies elements that can be very loosely connected to logics associated with socialism, thereupon generalizing such connections into an overall identity. The same is going on regarding higher education. They locate elements of say equity or of critical, social justice, post-colonial perspectives across universities. But if mega-corporations are seen as a current threat the education system is seen as that and, more significantly, as a major force determining the future. And whereas boycotts and lawsuits against corporations are seen as feasible ways for the right to counter mega-corporate progressivism, such change is seen as less feasible in the education sector. Also, the right gets that higher education is an institutional home for Marxism per se.⁶ Either way, academic Marxism will very much be drawn up into attacks on the broader critical social justice presence.

We are starting to see direct challenges to the education sector. One is Florida “New College” that the Florida right took control of. Florida legislator Spencer Roach made the claim upon passage of the bill that it’s all about a “protection of intellectual diversity”. And that “Freedom of speech is an unalienable right, despite what Marxist professors and students think.”⁷ Like the neoliberalization of universities it starts with a few sites of capture, then more and more until the cascade unfolds. Students are fighting back but to no avail so far.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/philthatremains/status/1656619059956285442>

⁵ Cultural Marxism starts to take off on the right in the early 1990s. See on the right, Minnicino, 1992. By now much of the left is aware of its meaning. A rightwing exploration of it in depth is Toledano, 2006.

⁶ See, for example, prominent anti-Marxist figure James Lindsay’s website, <https://newdiscourses.com/2022/09/theft-american-education/>.

⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/apr/25/florida-bill-record-professors-universities>.

It is natural to treat these assertions as fringe conspiratorial claims that progressive elites, activists, and institutional staffs are pursuing a hidden Marxist/communist agenda, which they originally learned in universities. But they can, even when the right is out of power, influence how people are viewed and evaluated by the millions open to rightist messaging, whereupon center and progressive elites might take one's leftist political background into consideration in hiring (a pattern prevalent in the 1950s and early 1960s). The right is constantly on the search for socialists in prominent institutional positions—and there are claims that Marxism wholly hegemonic in the US—and they found one in the new American Library Association head Emily Drabinski, who is portrayed as manifestly Marxist (Drabinski is a socialist).

The right makes a big deal about Rudi Dutschke's "march through the institutions" concept. A popular rightist speaker is Dave Brat, dean of the business school at the evangelical Christian Liberty University. He is a former Republican representative from Virginia. For him, like many rightists, the march through the institutions, is ultimately Frankfurt school inspired, to secretly divide society in class war if possible but in identity wars affecting all institutions not just those of the corporation terrain. Again, this is the cultural Marxist angle and the right picked up on Marcuse's 1960s emphasis on identity groups and students as a basis of struggle, given the perceived dying possibilities for working class mobilization. The infrastructure for all this as they see it is the university.

How does the right link identity politics with "communism?" As one popular influencer and author, Jesse Kelly,⁸ seemingly obsessed with Marxism, frames it, communism appeals to envy and the desire to take people's property, wealth, and take even the power of males: "it's the promise to hurt the people you blame for your problems in exchange for power."⁹ In his view such people don't have to be expressly communist, they can be "woke," just caring about, say, LGBTQIA+; but they are communist nonetheless, because of a basic commitment to the logic of communism as he defines it. This demonization of "communism" and Marxism, it is worth noting, is not just happening in US and its not just about influencers or MAGA leaders. A UK MP, Mariam Cates, recently claimed cultural Marxism is destroying young adults and attributes blame to it that rather than financial pressures and poverty for burgeoning mental health challenges.¹⁰

A key aspect of the attack on academic Marxism is China. The CCP is demonized by the right and connections are being made to universities, especially through funding attributed to China.¹¹ In the infamous Congressional bill of February 2023 condemning socialism, China figured prominently.¹²

The right is mobilizing Chinese migrants for this task. An example is Xi Van Fleet who the far right loves to engage.¹³ She describes herself as: "Chinese by birth; American by choice.

⁸ <https://twitter.com/JesseKellyDC>

⁹ <https://www.thefirsttv.com/watch/american-communism-the-rights-new-fight/>

¹⁰ https://youtu.be/mqigUQmfwVc?si=0vEpPRbnodJ_JXON&t=1683

¹¹ <https://spectator.org/ccp-american-universities-confucius-institutes/> .

¹² <https://thehill.com/homenews/house/3841636-house-passes-resolution-denouncing-socialism-vote-splits-democrats/>

¹³ A recent engagement is by the extremely popular figure Tucker Carlson <https://x.com/TuckerCarlson/status/1762249935116963993?s=20>

Survivor of Mao's Cultural Revolution. Defender of liberty."¹⁴ Recently she distinguished for her audience class Marxism versus cultural Marxism. To quote her: "Class Marxism is made to appeal to the worst of human nature: lust for other's wealth and lust for power. Cultural Marxism (Woke) exploits the best of human nature such as kindness and empathy, and weaponizes it for subjugation."¹⁵ It is hard to miss the same logic proffered by Kelly. Another example is Lily Tang Williams, who is running for a Congressional seat in New Hampshire.¹⁶ She speaks across the US in various public forums and clearly links China, Marxism in US colleges and universities, and other left approaches often labeled under critical race theory. She emphasizes how K-12 teachers, librarians, and state agency staffs and officials are drawn into the Marxist (broadly conceived) framework and in turn will convert especially children to the leftist cause,¹⁷ all the while aiding China in its attempt to colonize the US from within. Such notions are verified in the rightist thinking by claims to possessing evidence of such a mode of indoctrination such as an interview with a NY faculty member, Jeremy Tausch.¹⁸ Additionally, China is seen as closely tied to global capitalist organizations such as the World Economic Forum, seen as highly influential among US elites and academics, and portrayed by the right as, consistent with communism, seeking the end of private property ("you will own nothing") for non-elites in the name of fighting climate change.¹⁹

It is worth noting that the attack on Marxism, and specifically what is seen as a key fault, Marxism as the right sees it in the university (manifest as Marxist faculty, Marxist themes on syllabi and broader critical left themes and faculty) is not only about negation. It is also having a positive benefit. The right may be fashioning a superficially multiracial and multi-ethnic populism that expressly targets Marxism and socialism (or more typically under the label of "communism") to understand the challenges migrant and non-white communities face. The problems of America are Marxism, not exploitation or racism. Anti-Marxism is a unifying theme. Not only does one see far more blacks, Asians, and Latinx among rightist influencers (e.g., Kash Patel, Raheem Kassam, Candice Owens, Byron Donalds, and Tim Scott) but polls show a definitive rise in support for Donald Trump.²⁰

Conclusion

The right's seeing Marxism and communism everywhere left of center on the political spectrum may be a sort of perverted mirror of the left seeing fascism everywhere, right of centre. But how seriously should this be taken? This essay suggests it may be time to take it more seriously rather than just sneer at the right's attacks on Marxism, as merely stupid, fringe, wrongheaded. This is what Martin Jay (2010) did a few years back. Perhaps it is time to consider what effects it yields and benefits it provides a large segment of people in the global North mobilized by the right.

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/XVanFleet>.

¹⁵ <https://twitter.com/XVanFleet/status/1656488791064838144>.

¹⁶ <https://www.lilytangwilliams.com>

¹⁷ Recently some Florida legislators are trying to make it mandatory to teach the "history" of Communism, of course focused on "atrocities." See <https://www.theepochtimes.com/us/florida-may-require-history-of-communism-classes-in-public-schools-5590167>

¹⁸ <https://rumble.com/v2bhqcm-college-professor-admits-politically-targeting-students-to-influence-them-i.html>

¹⁹ See, for example <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/countering-chinas-drive-global-dominance>

²⁰ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2023/09/19/trump-poll-support-black-hispanic/>

Broader questions this topic raises bear on whether the socialist left and academic Marxism are stuck in dilemmas that have been long observed, one notably since Weimar Germany: continue to support, strongly, free political development of all tendencies so the socialist left itself can develop, but thereby risk the development the right. Does the alternative of controlled political development (suppressing the right) put socialism at risk should it once again be a force; where the same control practices could be used against it, it being capitalism's real enemy? From the other side, what the right is picking up on in its effort to label key organizations of power of the liberal capitalist world as radical leftist is the embedding of the latter in that world. If the radical left is "doing work" for capitalism's liberal center as a counter to the right, what are the implications of it being an "acceptable" viewpoint and force within – and under – the broad institutional nexus of a seemingly progressive capitalism, within which corporate power significantly grows year by year? These questions, in my view, are central to how we might think of the role of academic Marxism in the possibilities of the development of socialism in the core of capitalist power.

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