

## Narratives of Communist Betrayal: A 'Western' Trope

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A characteristic feature of European-derived, or North Atlantic' approaches to communism is the narrative of betrayal: at some point, a communist revolution was betrayed by someone, betrayed itself, ran into the mud, 'failed'.

I was first struck by this narrative some years ago when I was working intensely on Lenin.<sup>2</sup> And it was inescapable in much of the secondary literature when I was engaging deeply with Stalin.<sup>3</sup> Recently, it has struck me once again while delving into the theory and practice of the socialist state. Let me be clear: the betrayal narrative is one found mostly in European-derived traditions. Although Marxists in these parts are fond of the narrative, it is also common among liberals and conservatives. One can find stray examples other parts of the world too, in the mouths of one or two who have been unduly influenced by this narrative. In what follows, I outline some examples of the narrative, before turning to consider the closely related dimension of pristine origins.

### Betrayals, Betrayals Everywhere

If you hold to this type of story, a betrayal can be found almost everywhere you look. The initial example is that Engels betrayed Marx. Being of lesser intellect and not adequately trained – or so the story goes – Engels did not understand Marx. So Engels 'glossed' and 'distorted' what Marx said, especially in work that he produced on his own or after Marx's death. It may have been Engels's immense efforts in editing the second and

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<sup>1</sup> Or 'Western', but this term is loose and impossible-to-pin-down. Chinese has an ideal term, *meiou*, using the first character for the USA (*meiguo*) and for Europe (*ouzhou*), but this is impossible to render into English, except perhaps as 'Euro-American'. Even this term loses the specificity of the USA and replaces it with a term for the two continents of South and North America.

<sup>2</sup> See especially Roland Boer, "Before October: The Unbearable Romanticism of Western Marxism," *Monthly Review Magazine* (2011), <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/boero81011.html>; Roland Boer, "The 'Failure' of Communism: A 'Fall' Narrative," *Philosophers for Change* (2014), <http://philosophersforchange.org/2014/10/28/the-failure-of-communism-a-fall-narrative>.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Boer, *Stalin: From Theology to the Philosophy of Socialism in Power* (Beijing: Springer, 2017).

third volumes of *Capital*, or his *Dialectics of Nature* (1873-82) and *Anti-Dühring* (1877-78) from which *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (1880) was drawn. Thus, the editing efforts botched Marx's work, while the effort to extend dialectical materialism into the natural sciences was fatally flawed. Given the profound influence of *Anti-Dühring* on the subsequent tradition – every Marxist of the second and third generations studied this text closely – that tradition was impossibly betrayed at the hand of Engels. It is relatively easy to refute this narrative, but this is not my task here.

Lenin's putative betrayal is more contested ground, with some seeing Lenin as a purveyor of distorted Marxism from the beginning, others that Lenin betrayed the revolution after October 1917, or that Stalin was responsible for the betrayal. But what is meant by 'betrayal' in this case? Let me take the example of Lenin's betrayal of himself, for this is consistent with the role of Stalin in this case. According to this story, Lenin held to some form of 'democratic' position, envisaging the soviets as versions of the Paris commune. The model may have been updated and reshaped a little in light of circumstances, but it held to 'democratic participation' by workers and peasants at local and national levels, open and free-wheeling debate within the communist party, and would form the basis of socialism after the revolution. However, what happened very rapidly was an authoritarian move, hollowing out the soviets in the name of the dictatorship of the proletariat, if not replacing the proletarian dictatorship with the dictatorship of the party. In short, Lenin moved from a 'democratic' commune model to an authoritarian approach. Stalin merely carried this through to its logical conclusion. The examples could be multiplied: economically, 'state capitalism' was gradually introduced, a global revolution was abandoned for the sake of socialism in one country, the 'withering away of the state' was replaced with an authoritarian state characterised by the secret police, the self-determination of minority nationalities turned into their forced assimilation, and so on. The only difference is where one draws the line, whether within Lenin's own thought and practice or between Lenin and Stalin. The latter is, of course, the one who began to be systematically demonised not long after he died.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Domenico Losurdo, *Stalin: Storia e critica di una leggenda nera* (Rome: Carocci editore, 2008).

These days, I am most interested in the way a betrayal narrative has been constructed and is now assumed by many in the case of Chinese socialism. I am less interested in the hypothesis that Mao betrayed Marxism himself, whether because he took over unreconstructed Soviet Marxism of the 1930s or whether he did so of his own initiative. I am more interested in how the betrayal narrative has been deployed by self-confessed 'Maoists' and how this has influenced a wider misperception from conservatives to radicals.

According to this version, Mao was indeed a true communist, developing a breathtaking version adapted for Chinese conditions. The culmination of Mao's vision was the 'Great Cultural Revolution' in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Here was full collectivisation, public property, equality in pay and even clothes, idealism, the beginnings of socialist culture .... However, waiting in the wings was Deng Xiaoping, the 'capitalist roader'. Rising high, deposed, then returning on Mao's death and dispensing with the 'Gang of Four', Deng began – so it is asserted – the process of turning China from a socialist country into a capitalist one. All of this is embodied in the 'reform and opening up' from 1979. And Deng began the process of using coded language to indicate the shift: 'socialism with Chinese characteristics' was and is a code for rampant capitalism; a 'socialist market economy' does equal service; 'core socialist values' means liberalism. All this was extremely clever, it is suggested, since the CPC could not give up on the rhetoric of Marxism, so it emptied Marxism of any meaning (perhaps replacing it with nationalism. The purpose: to keep the CPC firmly in power.

This story continues: subsequent presidents – Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao – played the same game. Now we find the destruction of the 'iron rice bowl' (Chinese welfare state), the rise of a 'middle class', the 'suppression' of the working class – all with a nod and wink while speaking of Marxism. And Xi Jinping has produced his own collection of terms: the 'Chinese Dream', the 'two centenary goals' and revitalised the term 'moderately prosperous' society, all the while clamping down on 'dissent' and 'freedom of speech' to enhance his hold on power. A communist party has – according to this spectacular story – enabled the transition not from capitalism to socialism, but from socialism to capitalism.

The pieces of this narrative have been laid carefully for two or three decades, trading on half-truths, wilful ignorance and sheer twisting of the facts. Apart from the fact that it faces enormous difficulties in understanding the role of Marxism in Chinese socialism, all the way from culture and education, through society and politics, to economics, it usually entails a pre-judgement that means one does not even need to bother with Marxism as such in China. After all, no-one 'believes' in it anymore, do they?

As a final sample of this narrative of betrayal, let me return to Marx. In this case, it is the younger humanistic Marx who betrays the older scientific one. How so? It begins with the late publication of some key materials from the young Marx, such as 'Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law' in 1927, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts' in 1932, and *The German Ideology*, co-authored with Engels, in 1932. Here is a younger, more 'humanistic' Marx, which led and continues to lead some to emphasise this dimension of his thought as a counter to 'Scientific Socialism' (whether of the Soviet Union or in other forms). In response, Althusser in particular has argued that this earlier material – published later – was not the true Marx, who is to be found in his later, scientific works. This would have to be the most intriguing betrayal narrative of all, since it operates in reverse.

### **Pristine Origins**

As I have already indicated, I focus here neither on how these specific accounts face immense hurdles on closer scrutiny, nor the motivation for them, but on the nature of the narrative of betrayal itself. Two points are relevant.

First, the story has profound resonances with the biblical story of the 'Fall' of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Here a 'paradise' – if somewhat flawed due to the forbidden tree(s) – is lost due to the wilful disobedience of the first human beings. Initially, it was a southwest Asian story that has overlaps with others from the same part of the world, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh, but it eventually became a crucial story in European culture. The story in its biblical form has a distinct political setting, providing the eventual justification for a form of governance (monarchy) and control of wayward human beings (Thomas Hobbes comes to mind as an influential later version of this account). But it has come to

be seen in much wider terms, speaking of the human condition, characterised by a mythical account of disobedience, sin and betrayal of an original ideal impulse. In this form, it became part of the wider foundations for European-derived cultures, shaping cultural assumptions, the nature of thought processes, if not historical reconstructions even of the modern variety. Thus, the narrative of Genesis, European assumptions concerning human nature, the way history is so often reconstructed, as well as narratives concerning Marxism seem to have a remarkably similar pattern.

Second and related, the account of betrayal trades on a notion of pristine origins. Time and again, I have found that a purveyor of one or another version of the story assumes a distinct idea of what socialism should be (never what actually exists). They base this idea on some texts of Marx. I write 'some' deliberately, for the texts selected form a 'canon within the canon': favoured texts that are meant to express the core of Marx's position. Thus, socialism (which Marx did not distinguish from communism) appears in the Paris commune, concerning which Marx waxed lyrical in 'The Civil War in France' (1871). Here workers devolved the functions of parliament, army, police and judiciary to workers' bodies that were directly elected and subject to recall. The commune was decentralised, removed repression and did away with the 'state'. Or one may invoke parts of 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', especially in the higher stage of communism, when economic exploitation is removed, classes disappear, even divisions between town and country, if not between mental and physical labour, so that the biblically-derived communist slogan applies: 'from each according to ability, to each according to need'.

Once you have these original and authentic definitions of socialism and/or communism, you can make an easy connection with a betrayal narrative.<sup>5</sup> Before a revolution, or perhaps for a while afterwards, the revolutionaries held to the ideal – think of Lenin in particular, but also Mao. But soon enough, they gave up on the ideal. It may have been force of circumstances, or a turn in the face of imminent failure, or simply a weakness of will. And if Lenin or Mao did not do so themselves, then Stalin or Deng were

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<sup>5</sup> This search for origins can also be manifested in the whole dynamic of 'revisionism' in Marxism itself (I have heard the charge levelled at someone only recently and with some vigour).

responsible for overturning the socialist ideal and destroying it. The outcome: socialism has never been realised as yet, for the true moment still awaits us.

Once again, this search for and latching onto a notion of pristine origins has resonances with Christian thought and practice. In this case, the authentic moment may be found somewhere in the biblical texts, preferably in the words of Jesus himself (the 'Sermon on the Mount' is a favoured location). Soon enough, these words and the community they envisaged was adulterated and betrayed. Here the line can be drawn at almost any point: between Jesus and the early church (the Apostle Paul); between the form of the early Christian community and the later betrayal by the institutional church; between the doctrine of justification by faith through grace and the doctrine of salvation by works ...

The problem here is that one can find justification for a number of positions in the texts, for these texts are not uniform. So one has to choose some texts, downgrade or ignore the others that contradict one's choice and then criticise those who latch onto precisely these downgraded texts. The history of Christianity reveals this process again and again. A group or a spokesperson emerges, argues that the institution as it exists has betrayed and sullied the original impulse, and begins a process of reform in the name of an authentic and original ideal based on a selection of texts. Sometimes, these movements were contained and channelled within the institution (think of the medieval orders in the Roman Catholic Church or monastic renewal in the Eastern Orthodox Church). At other times, they were brutally repressed and crushed, as many a radical religious movement in the European Middle Ages. And at other times, due to wider cultural, social and economic shifts, the reform effort became a whole new and enduring movement. The Protestant Reformation is the most notable example.

The analogies with European-derived Marxism should be obvious, if not the struggles between the varieties of socialist, communist and anarchist movements today (as Engels already noted in his 'On the History of Early Christianity' from 1895). But we can find it also among non-Marxists and even anti-Marxists. They too assume a certain

definition of an ideal socialism, usually based on the very same texts used by Marxists, and then use those to dismiss the actual efforts to construct socialism.

## Alternatives

I have focused on European-derived, or 'Western' Marxism due to its preference for betrayal narratives and ideas of pristine origins. It can also be found in Russian Marxism, given the comparable cultural dynamics of that part of the world (think of the long-running struggle between Stalin and Trotsky and what their names have come to signify).

Are there alternative approaches that may well do better than the one I have been analysing? Recently, I was having one of my many discussions with a Chinese comrade and we came to the topic in question. In fact, these reflections arose in part from that discussion. She is fully aware of the narrative of betrayal, having devoted much of her working life to studying 'Western' Marxism. But she also admitted to not understanding it; or rather, she finds it difficult to understand how it can make sense of actual tradition. Instead, she prefers a process of clarification of previously obscure or unresolved points in each subsequent development. Is that a more Chinese approach? I wondered. Yes, it is, she affirmed. How do mistakes arise, or is every statement a clarification? Mistakes do arise, such as when there is an effort to turn back the clock, to reassert an older and more obscure position that has subsequently been clarified. Or perhaps if someone moves to undermine and dispense with Marxism itself.

I am still working out the implications of this clarifying approach, particularly if it can also incorporate the following possibilities. One is to argue for interpretation in the spirit, rather than the letter of Marxism. Or: instead of invoking the letter of the original text and judging all in its light, one sees Marxism as a method for dealing with every new situation. As Lenin, Stalin and Mao were fond of saying, Marxism is not a dogma, but a guide to action.

The other approach is related but takes a different approach. Changing historical circumstances produce new problems that must be analysed and solved in new ways. These problems did not face Marx or Engels, while other problems did not face

subsequent leaders. The circumstances have been and are many, ranging from unforeseen economic problems, through the development of policies in relation to minority nationalities, to what a socialist culture might actually be. Perhaps the two main changes in circumstances turn on the question of power. Marx and Engels were never in a position to exercise power after a successful communist revolution (as they well knew), so most of the developments in relation to socialism in power had to deal with issues that they simply had not experienced and could not foresee. And none of the previous experiences of socialism in power has prepared us for the moment when China becomes not merely the most powerful socialist country in human history (it already is), but the most powerful economic, political and cultural force in the world.

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