

The Question of a Stagnant Marxism: Is Marxism Exegetical or Scientific?

Why is it that there exists a tendency in Marxism—itsself a theory of change—that remains unchanging? Simoun Magsalin investigates.

Simoun Magsalin

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Perhaps some analogies are in order

Among the medieval Jews, there was an interpretive tradition called the Tosafat in which successive generations of Jewish scholars commentate on verses and older commentaries. A page of a Tosafat book is made up of a single verse of the holy texts in a box; on its right is the commentary of an ancient learned Rabbi, and on the left is the Tosafist commentary on the verse and more commentary on the older Rabbi's commentary. The Tosafat is an exegetical tradition where exegesis means the critical interpretation and explanation of a text.

Such an interpretive tradition can be good and necessary. Ancient holy texts may remain static, but the reading of these texts constantly changes. These texts are constantly reinterpreted and re-contextualized for new times and new generations, and older commentary is built upon and expanded.

In Marxism, there seems to be a similar Tosafist-esque exegetical tradition that interprets and re-contextualizes the classical texts for new times and new generations. However, while interpretations and re-contextualizations will always be necessary, this is not theoretical development of Marxism as a scientific tradition, but rather as an interpretive one.

Consider that in a scientific tradition such as chemistry, an educator does not recommend the reading of alchemical tomes for an introductory chemistry course. What is instead read and taught in an introductory course is the dialectical synthesis of centuries of alchemist and chemist knowledge. Thus in the field of chemistry, a review of the fundamentals does not constitute a return to an ancient alchemist tradition, but a body of work descended from it in the form of a textbook. Such a fundamental textbook would be outdated if it were ten years old, and these textbooks indeed have to be written and re-written almost yearly in order to accurately represent the current understanding of chemistry. Like an up-to-date chemistry textbook, chemistry as a body of knowledge and as a science is also the dialectical synthesis of all previously existing knowledge on the subject.

Can we say the same about Marxism? Is Marxism today the dialectical synthesis of the one hundred and fifty years of scientific socialism? Certainly, we can say that Marxism has had more than a century of development, but why is it that our textbooks are still the same as a hundred years ago? Introductory texts such as those in chemistry are supposed to incorporate the latest advances from the scientific canon and introduce readers to the current understanding of the field. If we are to recommend introductory texts, what would we recommend? We would likely suggest a return to the classics—perhaps Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels themselves—which is something chemists and other scientists are unlikely to do with regards to introductory readings. Indeed, Jordan Peterson, that darling of the conservatives, only read the Manifesto of the Communist Party in his ill-fated debate against Slavoj Žižek, making a foolish mistake of assuming the Manifesto represented a contemporary understanding of Marxism. Yet clearly we must be fair: intuitively, to recommend Karl Marx is not the same as recommending

Nicolas Flamel (the famed alchemist who supposedly crafted the Philosopher's Stone). But we must interrogate ourselves: Why is this so?

Stagnant tendencies in Marxism

Consider the Marxist theory of the state; what texts do we point eager learners to read about the state? Perhaps we would recommend the last chapter of Fredrick Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* or the entirety of Vladimir Lenin's *The State and Revolution*. But have there seriously not been advances to the Marxist theory of the state in the past hundred and so years? In the past century the state has been a dynamic force that has evolved and grown since Lenin's time; are we to be satisfied by reinterpretations and re-contextualizations of Lenin? Surely Lenin cannot predict the evolution of the state from 1917 to 2021 nor can his insights remain valid in perpetuity regardless of the timelessness of these insights. We cannot be satisfied by mere reinterpretation and re-contextualizations. We must now ask: Is Marxism a tradition of reinterpretation and commentary upon commentary like the *Tosafot* (after all, Lenin's *The State and Revolution* is itself a commentary upon Marx and Engels); or is it a living and dynamic scientific tradition?

Again, to be fair, modern Marxist theories of the state do in fact exist. One can consult the 4th issue of *Viewpoint Magazine* or various discussions coming out of Marxist academia. But if modern Marxist theories on the state exist, why is it that these have not dislodged Lenin's *The State and Revolution*? Why is it that we still recommend *The State and Revolution* rather than a modern text? Introductory texts ought to represent the most contemporary understanding of a scientific field dialectically built upon earlier theories and containing all the previous understanding combined with new innovations and discoveries. I worry that the situation of using a century-old book on the Marxist theory of the state is like imagining fictional "chemists" who refuse to adopt modern chemistry and continue to defend the "science" of alchemy. Is it possible it is not the Marxist theory of the state itself that is marked by such poverty but the "Marxists" who choose to freeze their theoretical understanding and pedagogy on the state to the Marxist classics like our imaginary "chemists" who refuse to move on from Nicolas Flamel? Why is it we still recommend reading century-old texts rather than contemporary ones like chemists and other scientists do? Recall that if a chemistry book is ten years old, it is already out-of-date, yet Marxist texts are a century or more older! Even the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* was out of date by Marx's and Engels' living admission, so why are these still seen as introductory texts? Why is it that a not-insignificant tendency in Marxism is stagnant and unchanging? To be sure, this is not an attack on the correctness of these texts, but rather a question of why Marxism has failed to dialectically transcend these texts into a new synthesis, just as chemists and other scientists come together every other year to draft modern textbooks. The question is then not correctness, but dialectical dynamism. If these

texts have correct elements then a dialectical development of a theory like the Marxist theory of the state ought to retain these correct elements while transcending outdated or incorrect elements into a new synthetic whole. But instead of a new synthesis, there are tendencies in Marxism that remain stuck with century-old texts.

Do not interpret this as a call to cast down the classics and trample on them. Returning to the classics will continue to be necessary to understand the development of the history of scientific socialist thinking. However, we must separate historiography from theoretical development. These classics may have been correct in their time and place but we have to consider new theories and new ways of thinking of things that are relevant for our time and our place. To appeal to the classics because they are classics and they were correct is to make the mistake of appealing to an authority rather than a dialectical process. An appeal to a logical and dialectical process will ultimately retain within it the insights and contributions from the classics integrated into a new synthesis.

Do not mistake this as arguing for revisionism—or similar concepts—either. Principles can be timeless and having principles is not the same thing as having stagnant theory. For example, one can refuse to compromise the principle of revolutionary strategy while at the same time have the theoretical justification for it evolve with the times and accumulate the learned experiences. It is possible to continue to uphold the necessity of revolutionary strategy, hold firm the rejection of evolutionary reformist paths, while at the same time develop and grow our theories and practices. The phenomena of capital and class struggle evolves and changes, so the critique of capital must similarly change. To freeze a critique of capital to the same arguments used a hundred years ago is to stagnate a theoretical understanding of a phenomenon, thereby preventing us from understanding it in its contemporary form.

Stagnant Marxism today

In my experience—and I do not doubt others have experienced the same thing—I have seen the classical texts and past experiences become sacred cows and holy scriptures which are cited as if these are a priori correct due to an appeal to authority. For example: one thousand four hundred and one words from Engel’s 1873 essay “On Authority” have stunted the intellectual development of thousands—if not millions—of Marxists the world over when it comes to anti-authoritarianism and the principle of authority. Engels uncritically equates authority with violence when he says a “revolution is certainly the most authoritarian thing there is; it is the act whereby one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part by means of rifles, bayonets and cannon.” What Engels does is construct a strawman argument misrepresenting concepts used by anti-authoritarian socialists—those being the principle of authority and authoritarianism—to the point of rendering these concepts meaningless. He then proceeds to demolish this strawman of his own creation. By failing to critically engage and

charitably construct the arguments of the anti-authoritarian socialists, Engels thereby severely weakens his critique yet congratulating himself on a job well done tearing apart his strawman. Engels is also incorrect that the violence (or “imposition of will” to use Engels’ term) used to liberate is equal to the violence used to dominate. However, the “imposition of will” to liberate cannot be equated to the imposition of will to dominate. If we take Engels’ equation of the two at face value, then revolutionary violence is as equatable to counterrevolutionary violence. Or to put it another way, the violence used by the slave to liberate themselves is equal to the violence of slavery! One may suggest that Engels was being sarcastic and exposing the meaninglessness of the principle of authority, but this does not explain his tacit failure to critically engage with the ideas of his contemporaries. If one fails to engage with the ideas one is critiquing, then the critique itself fails.

“On Authority” is clearly one of Engels’ weakest texts where the clarity and sharpness of his other texts like *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* are markedly absent. Yet terminally online “Marxists” constantly cite it again and again and appeal to its authority as if it is a priori correct simply because Engels wrote it. Any anarchist worth their black banners can demolish the weak foundations on which Engels built “On Authority” and no Marxist who has done the work of engaging with both the Marxist and anarchist canons would cite this weakest of Engels’ texts in critiquing anarchism. Even if Engels had charitably constructed the arguments he meant to rebut, and even if his rebuttal was correct for its time and place, there is no way such an argument would be valid in perpetuity. The anarchism of Engels’ time has since had more than a hundred years to evolve and refine its theories and practice; to assume a poorly argued more-than-a-hundred-year-old text is a coherent argument against contemporary anarchism is to be sorely mistaken. It is clear that the “Marxists” who appeal to the a priori authoritativeness of texts belong to the static and unchanging tendencies in Marxism.

To cite another example: It is well known that Mao Zedong allied with the Chinese bourgeoisie to defeat the invasion of the fascist Japanese empire. The lesson that this anecdote suggests is that sometimes we can unite with class enemies against greater existential threats such as a fascist-imperialist invasion. However, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) looks at this anecdote and instead sees the lesson that the national bourgeoisie can be allied with in the face of imperialism. This uncritical reading of the Chinese experience leads to the CPP to constantly shop for bourgeois allies decade after decade, with the Party founder Jose Maria Sison even going so far as to tacitly endorse the presidential campaign and later presidency of the openly fascistic Rodrigo Duterte; this despite so many other Filipino socialists noting the opportunist politics of Duterte.

Imperialism as it was experienced in the Philippines in 2016 is not the same as an imperialist invasion in the Chinese experience. For one, imperialism is not an existential threat to the Filipino bourgeoisie (national or otherwise) on the same level as it was to the Chinese bourgeoisie. Capital in this century is international and so the

bourgeoisie all over the world are now also internationalists; to uphold the concept of an insular national bourgeoisie in the 21st century is to fool oneself, to put blinds over one's eyes. Thus, cooperating with the national bourgeoisie in the face of invasion is not a comparable material condition to the political situation in the Philippines. However, because Mao and the Chinese communists won by cooperating with the national bourgeoisie, Filipino communists in the CPP think they can do the same. Yet, supporting the presidency of an open fascist like Duterte—and now the burgeoning support for yet another so-called “national bourgeois” in Leni Robledo—has resulted in misstep after misstep with National Democrats (the tendency that the CPP leads) making fools of themselves in denying or obscuring their role in Duterte's rise. Ultimately there are so many other examples of this kind of politics with and within National Democracy, but this is not a place to do a full accounting of the collaborationist and opportunist politics of the CPP. It will suffice to say that their Marxism is frozen and stagnant, which obscures a sober reading of the specific conditions faced in the Philippines which leads them to lethal misstep after lethal misstep.

Creative alternatives to the CPP's stale understanding of imperialism are out there. The Marxist theory of imperialism as popularized by Lenin has a contemporary equivalent in the World Systems Theory elaborated by Immanuel Wallerstein. Huey P. Newton likewise developed his theory of Intercommunalism to show that nations no longer meaningfully exist in the age of imperialism and places revolutionary agency upon the lumpen-proletariat, arguing that the proletariat changed and lost revolutionary agency. Yet again, the question remains: Why is it that these theories have not displaced older texts like Lenin's *Imperialism* in Marxist ideological pedagogy? This is not to say they are not read, but the centrality of the classics did not shift towards a new dialectical synthesis like new editions of a science textbook.

The work of liberation is not the path of easy questions

It is clear we can find both tendencies of stagnancy and dynamism in Marxism; it is fruitless to claim Marxism is one or the other as a whole. The work of liberation is not the path of easy questions, and indeed many difficult questions still stand. Why is it that there exists a tendency in Marxism—itsself a theory of change—that remains unchanging? Is this ultimately a tendency we want to keep around? And if these unchanging tendencies are not things we want to keep around, then how do we transcend these unchanging tendencies?

If we may venture certain guesses, this stagnant tendency within Marxism persists because there is indeed an element of timelessness to classical Marxist canon. The problems of today seem to be very much the same as the problems a hundred and two hundred years ago. However, we must be cautioned that this face value is illusory.

Certainly, elements of the crisis of capitalism from two hundred years ago remain, but these have not remained static. The crisis of capitalism also moves dialectically. Elements of the earlier crisis are integrated into newer and more contemporary crises, with some aspects being resolved in part, but these elements forming new crises, new problems. The unchanging tendencies continue to hold valid critiques because the problems critiqued never really went away and elements from centuries ago persist. But this validity is limited because while the problems remain, it has since transformed into new beasts necessitating more contemporaneous assaults.

I would think it is easier to reuse old texts than write new ones and that it feels safer to keep to what one knows than to move into uncharted territory. Yet the crisis of capitalism and the state had since moved precisely into those uncharted territories. New theory is indeed built to chart these territories such as the dynamic contributions of Immanuel Wallerstein and Huey P. Newton. But those clinging to a stagnant Marxism cling to old maps—cling to what is familiar and well-tread. In doing so, they abdicate the field to those who do dare to chart new territories, some of whom may be comrades, others who may be class enemies.

How then do we transcend these unchanging tendencies? The naming of our demons is the first step to their exorcism. It is first through recognition and awareness that we can next build consciousness to counteract it. Has not consciousness always been the first step of the militant? By interrogating what is mistaken, we can build stronger theories and practices. We must level the “ruthless criticism of all that exists” not only on our foes, capitalism and the state, but on our own pedagogy, theory, and praxis. It is my hope that with sufficient consciousness of stagnant tendencies, we can begin to diagnose solutions.

While there does exist contemporaneously written introductory texts on Marxism, the question remains if these are reinterpretations and re-contextualizations of the classics or if they build upon the current Marxist oeuvre like the dialectical development of other sciences. If contemporary Marxism is indeed a transcendence from earlier thinking, then why is that Marxists are called to return to the classics again and again, something that other scientists do not necessarily do? Again, historiography is not the same thing as theoretical development. If indeed the recommendation to read Marx and Mao is not the same as the recommendation to read Nicolas Flamel, why is this so? Was not Flamel considered a scientist in his own day as well? What makes the structure of Marxism different from chemistry that while chemists must constantly rewrite their textbooks, the Marxist textbooks are still the classics and remain static?

Holy texts may be unchanging, but each generation develops new ways to read the scriptures, as medieval Tosafot and modern biblical hermeneutics shows. Just the same way, new experiences generate new readings of the Marxist classics. However, Marxist classics are not holy texts, so it is mistaken to simply assume these are a priori correct. New interpretations and re-contextualizations will be useful, but the value of these are suspect if we find the foundations to be weaker than we thought. As our review of “On Authority” has shown, authors are quite fallible. Indeed, both Marx

and Bakunin are alike in that they could not engage each other's arguments charitably, constantly misunderstanding and talking over another thereby weakening the value of their engagements.

It is ironic that we can recall as Marx said, "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," as if the Marxism of all dead generations weighs so heavily on our living minds. But ultimately, I would think the classics and interpretive-exegetical Marxism have their place. Readings and re-readings can still provide new insights and commentary. We still learn new things about the Bible and we will continue to learn new things from Marx. However, there has to be a point when we venture forth, use the well-charted territories of theory as a base of operations by which to chart and build new base camps climbing towards unknown peaks. As in climbing mountains with a large party, sometimes we do have to abandon the lowermost camps to reach the top, but ultimately we know the paths going back there should we need to return. The "poetry of the past" and its reinterpretation, then, are the base of operations, well-worn paths that we must know so we can return to them, but not a place to stay if we are to reach new heights, to take new poetry from the future.

On the question of if Marx is not like Flamel, we may have to reckon with the fact that scientific socialism as a science is simply not like chemistry. Chemistry is a natural science; it is positivist in that it seeks to describe the world. But are we not told: the point is to change it. Scientific socialism is ultimately normative in this regard. Even applied sciences are not normative: you mix two reagents together to get a desired and expected reaction. Water does not boil at a hundred degrees centigrade because it is part of their historical tasks; water boils regardless of whether we know why it boils. Sure, we can highlight descriptive aspects of Marxism that uses positivism to describe history and the world of capital, but these ultimately serve to prescribe normative ends: communism. In contrast, if the proletariat is not conscious of its ability to abolish itself as a class and abolish the state as state, then they will continue to reproduce the world of capital rather than hasten its abolition. Scientific socialism—and thus Marxism—is a normative science that uses its observation of the world to change it. These normative prescriptions simply cannot be subjected to positivism and falsification like in natural sciences and we must make peace with that fact. To read Marx and Mao is not akin to reading Flamel precisely because of its normative dimension, which has a certain timelessness that cannot be subjected to scientific positivism.

Conclusion

So we are made aware of the existence of a stagnant Marxism content to merely interpret itself. By observing introductory texts that function as a survey of a science's oeuvre, we find Marxism simply is not like other sciences because the introductory texts are usually a century old. Stagnant tendencies are most noticeable on unchanging

ideological syllabi which fail to represent the full wealth and dynamism of Marxism and are content to rehash century-old texts. This stagnant Marxism is observed in the phenomena of terminally online Marxists who cite texts as if they were a priori correct as if citing scripture instead of science. This tendency to uncritically adopt theoretical positions can cause disturbing strategic and tactical blunders as we have seen with the Communist Party of the Philippines.

Upon reflecting on the questions of canonizations and stagnations that I find that I am not a Marxist—just as Marx himself declares so himself in his old age. I am not a Marxist because I do not follow people but ideas; the naming of scientific socialist tradition as simply “Marxism” has never sat well with me. Already with the famous “I am not a Marxist,” Marx watched with anger as the dynamic and dialectical scientific socialism he worked his whole life to build was vulgarized by the Geusdist “Marxists.” Ever since, this dogmatic, unchanging, and stagnant tendencies in Marxism have only grown and spread. While Marx and Engels already openly declare that their earlier work like the Manifesto of the Communist Party is outdated, other Marxists seem unwilling to move on from old texts. Because these dogmatic, static, and stagnant tendencies in Marxism persist and are over-represented in Marxism, then I too must declare I am not a Marxist!

It is my hope that these questions and meditations can spark further discussion and I welcome replies. It is then the task of scientific socialists everywhere—Marxist or otherwise—to ask: Why is it that this unchanging tendency persists, and how may it be transcended?

Simoun Magsalin is a volunteer for the Marxist Internet Archive and administers the Tagalog section of the website, the Philippine history archive, and maintains the archives of Filipino Marxists and socialists.

The Ted K Archive

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