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Historical materialism is the self-knowledge of capitalism.

—Georg Lukacs

Michel Foucault somewhere observed that he couldn't tell the difference between historians and Marxists. Foucault seemed baffled by the persistence of a convention that insisted on separating historians from Marxists, even though both appealed to the form of the same narrative and continuist story line that moved like a fast-moving express train for a predetermined destination. Both, in short, were driven by a shared belief in the knowledge of the past whose secret order could be extracted (reconstructed) through the operation of a proper method. The differences between the two seemed slight and more often resembled disagreements over teleologies, agents, causal factors, and questions of periodization—a difference of accent rather than language.

Before World War II, Walter Benjamin had already called into question the claims of a historian's discourse that aimed to reconstruct the putative past of the present as it really happened and proposed a radically alternative approach based upon the construction of the past for a present weighted with danger. In the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Benjamin discounted both Marxist and non-Marxist historians for sharing a historicist conviction that history moved continuously and progressively along a chronological grid, where, he observed, a blank seriality worked to displace the present to an indeterminate past. Like many of his contemporaries in the interwar period, Benjamin was persuaded by the example of the Russian Revolution and its identification of the importance of the everyday—the durational present—and the unprecedented role played by the masses in the transformation of society. It was a primary aim of the Soviet achievement to replace an understanding of everyday life that had been previously linked to merely the "daily" and the "contingent" with one demanding political, social, and cultural transformation leading to massive dehierarchization of life and the establishment of a democratic order. With this transformation of everydayness into an active concept, conforming to Marx's own practice to analyze the "current situation," came also a radical rethinking of Marxist philosophy and theories of culture that would lead, everywhere the everyday was contested, to an abandonment of older practices based on naturalism (social Darwinist) and positivism. Benjamin and his generation had already seen how history itself had overtaken the program of historical stagism mandated by the Second International that still held Marxism hostage to the fantasy of progressive, linear story lines and the domination of stages "produced" by the

base/superstructure binary. At the same time, halfway around the globe, the Marxist philosopher Tosaka Jun had already positioned the everyday as a primary category for philosophic analysis and everydayness as the principle for measuring historical time. While Benjamin was calling for the formation of a new historical materialism capable of recognizing in the present a “moment of danger” and thus an entry point to constructing the past for it, Tosaka eschewed historical narrative altogether for a new conception of historical temporality based on the irreducibility of the space of everydayness. Benjamin was less concerned with retrieving a knowledge of the past, as such, than locating in the past a forgotten or repressed moment that could join with the experience of the present to constitute a dialectical image at standstill poised to usher in the “messianic cessation.” “A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition,” he wrote, “but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the ‘eternal’ image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.”¹ For these thinkers it was necessary to start from the present, as Lukacs advised—a present that would dominate the past, from the “Now” (both Benjamin and Tosaka employed the same term, even though they could not have known of the other’s writings), capable of leading to history and history to revolution, rather than presuming the existence of historical knowledge of a fixed past.

Yet orthodox Marxian historiography has never moved beyond this conception of transition and addressed its consequence for a relationship between the past and present, to take this critique seriously and explore its possibilities for envisaging a genuinely critical and radical discourse. Nor has it often questioned the claims of certainty associated with epistemological categories that produce such a “knowledge of the past.” Instead, the response of its historical practice has shown only a disavowal of the very crisis of Marxism experienced by the interwar generation, even after recognizing the vast disjuncture between theory and the observable tendencies of capitalism and the necessity of bridging the growing disparity by rethinking the discontinuities. This failure of nerve led to a reassertion of the validity of theory and the temporary or transitory character of capitalism. Hence, history writing matched the “quietism and waiting”² sanctioned by the absence of political initiatives usually associated with the strategy of the Second International and “workerist” social democratic parties yet clearly repudiated by all those thinkers who, like Benjamin, saw the necessity of thinking through a program of political intervention based upon an analysis of the current situation.

Nowhere is this Marxian desire to custodialize the continuist story line more characteristically apparent than in those now “classic” discussions over the transition from feudalism to capitalism, which sought to reaffirm the primacy of the stagist paradigm by concentrating on what came in between. Moreover, these

discussions managed unintentionally to affirm the nation-state as the privileged unit of analysis. Embedded in this turn to the unit of the nation (its boundaries somewhat expanded by the "Brenner Thesis") was, of course, the accompanying, unstated presumption of cultural specificity as a universal criterion. The stages that British history was made to perform and the transition it was supposed to enact, like those in Japan, were actually culturally exceptional fantasies (what does it mean to live a transition?) that resulted in situating the race/nation-state as a metonymical stand-in signifying universal import. The consequence of this strategy was to couple the story line stage theory was authorized to narrate with the political problems it was made to resolve in the name of Marxian orthodoxy. What has always troubled me about this progressive, linear form of schematicization is its insistence to assimilate the world outside of Euro-America to its rhythms and exemplars or to simply ignore this vast region altogether when experience failed to match its workerist aspirations.

Founded on the orthodoxy of the Second International, Marxist historiography has been driven by distinct stages whose movement reflects shifts in the productive base. As one mode of production succeeds another, an appropriate superstructure appears to symptomize the immense shift, signaling an event or episode of geologic magnitude similar to the movement of continental plates. Implanted in this theory is a logic of inevitable historical change (continuist and progressive) and the dependence of superstructural forms on the productive base which is external to the social topography it directs. The consequence of this interpretative strategy has been to forfeit both the autonomy (or semiautonomy) of the political present, as was recognized by Benjamin and his contemporaries, and the historical experiences of the world outside Euro-America. Just as the fixity of the past took precedence over the present and the analysis of contemporary social formations, so the exclusion of the world outside Euro-America was relegated to categories like the Asiatic mode of production and their variations which vainly tried to account for differences but invariably exceptionalized Europe's uniqueness. This was evident as recently as the publication of Perry Anderson's two-volume study of state formation, which paradoxically enlisted the Weberian problematic of uniqueness to propose that Western state building derived from a culturally irreducible (and presumably exceptional) political endowment. Not even a "Western Marxism," produced in an environment that had clearly recognized that the state was not going to wither away, would manage to sensitize Marxists to other possibilities directed to freeing historical practice from its historicist moorings and elucidating the present as the site of analysis and "actualization." Such an imagined Western Marxism was not simply the mutation of Marxism in Western Europe between the wars but, instead, one that was for and about the West. It was thus made to appear not as an opening to an emerging, new world but a closing down of an old one and its final ghettoization or, if I can borrow

from Dipesh Chakrabarty, its “provincialization.” Yet in this narrative desire to identify a different kind of Marxism conceptualized in the ruins of orthodox failure, resulting in a cultural analysis that might replace the older economism and its narrow workerism, it was easily overlooked that its most ardent proponents were actually rethinking the primary importance of the present in any consideration of the past (Benjamin) and envisaging the autonomy of political formations released from bondage to the economy (Gramsci). In other words, the immense and important effort to refigure a unit of analysis that was neither shadowed by prior historical stages nor constrained by culturally specific referents opened the way to imagine a broader world (the repressed outside of Euro-America) and one not necessarily organized along the lines of the race/nation-state. Even more important, the reorganization of Marxism that is made to reinforce the mythic claims of a unified West (what, after all, is “Western Marxism”?) and its privileged and exceptional location must be seen as actually part of a larger, global process already disclosing significant contributions to the experience of theory and practice in China, Japan, and India that would prefigure broader reconfigurations after the war in a decolonizing world. A Marxism locked into maintaining the privilege of a specific and exceptionalized location no longer qualifies as a radical analysis for historical practice but only as romantic nostalgia.

To regain the radical ground lost to a Westernized Marxism that was made to supplement an even more discredited stage theory of development and its workerist conceit, it was never necessary to rewrite the dominant culture within the symbolic spaces of capitalism as if the act signaled a difference and resistance. Such a recoding shows only that the everyday, the “irreducible remainder,” which Benjamin, Gramsci, and Tosaka had each, on his own, designated as a strategic “minimal unity” or trope capable of returning analysis and the past back to the present, would continue to be identified with capitalism rather than separated from it as the site for critical practice.³ It seems to me that the present moment marked by “globalization” is more propitious than ever to return to this tradition of earlier critique which sought to win back for historical materialism its radical vocation as it retraces for us the singular failure of its historical practice.

Notes

1. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zahn, ed. and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 262.
2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985), 22.
3. See H. Harootunian, *History's Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Problem of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).