

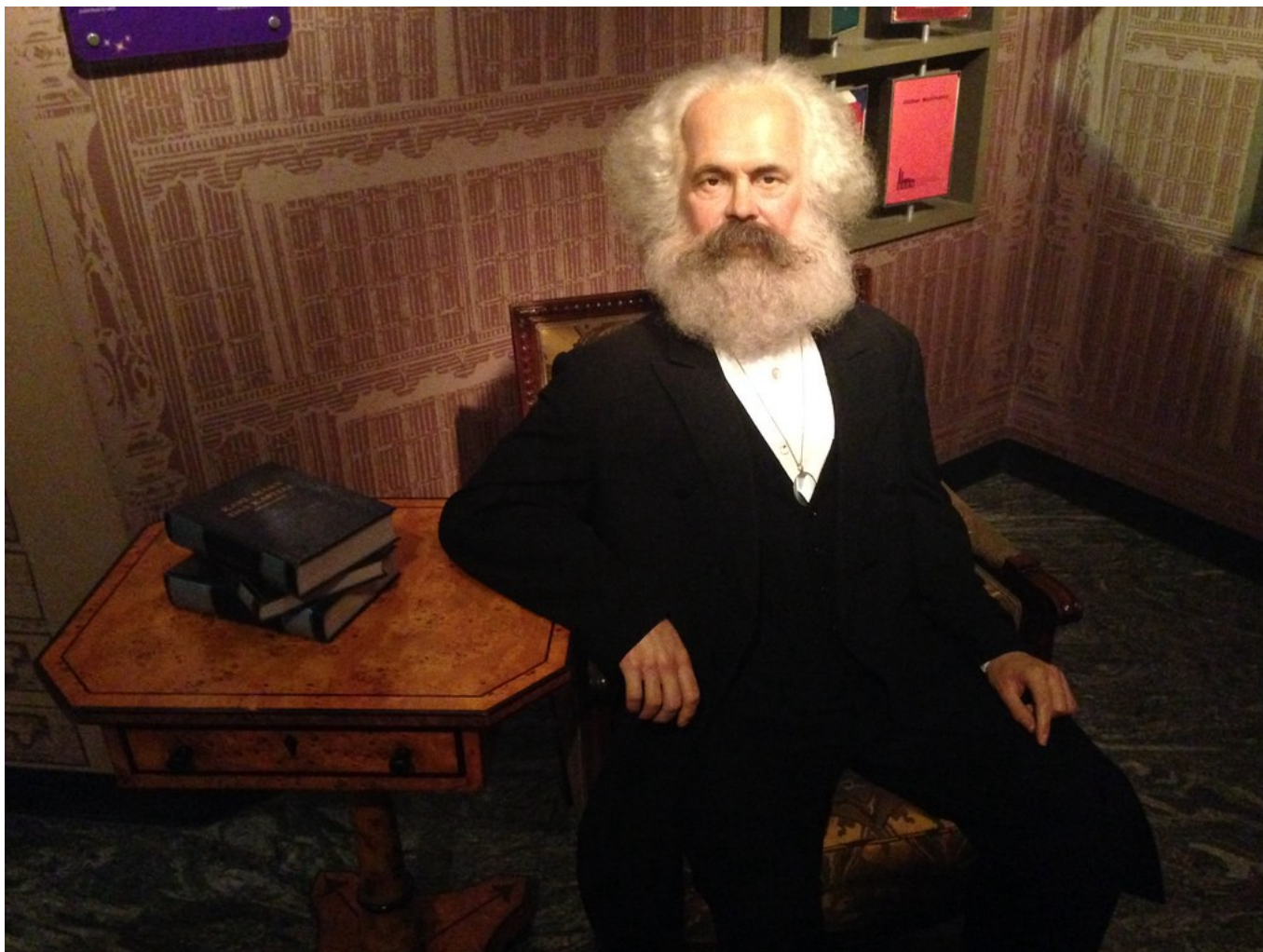
What Should We Do about Zombie Karl Marx?



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Karl Marx is dead, in case you hadn't heard. I've been to his grave at Highgate Cemetery in London and checked. He's definitely dead.

Marxism, on the other hand, is undead. It stays underground, waiting for the next global economic crisis, at which point it has a small resurgence. Then it goes back underground.

It seems that the zombie of Marxism has never quite recovered from that fatal blow, the fall of the Soviet Union. The mere mention of the Soviet Union sends the zombie scurrying back underground.

Yet Marxism always returns. And what's more, the zombie always shows some signs of life. Marxist class analysis never loses its charm. The owners of the world's means of production are exploiting the rest of us more than ever. The government is blatantly biased in the interests of the rich. Technology is better than ever, but poverty remains. We have the technology to solve climate change, but fossil fuel capitalists won't let that happen.

But some parts of the zombie Marx are rotten and beyond resuscitation. And it is those parts that prevent Marxism from ever becoming popular again. I want to quickly summarise those parts of Marxism that I think are dead and should be discarded. Perhaps, in this way, it would be possible to stitch together a strong, Frankenstein's monster of a post-Marxist ideology, that includes the sharp, relevant class analysis, but —unlike Marxism— is really ALIVE.

Ironically, the thing that is holding Marxism back is science. Or, more precisely, Marxism is held back by trying to be a science, when it never was.

The phrase, 'the Eternal Science of Marxism-Leninism' is one of the most terrifying 20th century propaganda slogans. The phrase comes from Stalin's official philosophy, Diamat, short for Dialectical Materialism. This philosophy, as expressed in Stalin's textbook, 'Dialectical and Historical Materialism', is one of the most megalomaniacal documents in world history. In this 52 page book, Stalin claims to develop a philosophy of... well, everything.

Stalin lays down the laws of development of nature and society, stating that everything develops according to a 'Dialectical' logic. 'Dialectic' itself could win an award for the philosophical concept with the largest number of contradictory interpretations. But for now, spoiler alert: Stalin doesn't manage to produce a successful philosophy of everything in 52 pages.

Nonetheless, Diamat was the official philosophy of the Soviet Union. You could literally be imprisoned or executed if you made any scientific discoveries that contradicted

Diamat.

How was Stalin so sure that his philosophy was true? Many contemporary Marxists will try to argue that Stalin is an anomaly in every regard. They say that he was simply a tyrant and a psychopath, as a way of avoiding any criticism of Marxism itself.

But you can actually see this kind of intellectual arrogance throughout the history of Marxism. Both before and after Stalin, many Marxists have claimed that dialectical and/or historical materialism is a science, and that it gives us access to absolute truth about history and society.

Take the writings of György Lukács and Louis Althusser, two highly-influential 20th century Marxist philosophers. In both of these authors' writings, you will find the idea that Karl Marx created a breakthrough in science. The alleged breakthrough can be summarized in this way: Marxism recognizes that all ideas are ultimately determined by class ideologies.

In plain English, this entails that almost everyone is being duped all the time, according to the needs of capitalism. It entails that every area of culture and industry ultimately serves the needs of capitalism. It entails, in Althusser's words, that "History is a process without a subject"; that nobody controls history, it just happens to us, driven by economic developments. Meanwhile, historical materialism is presented as the only way of seeing absolute truth about society and history, and also as the only working class perspective.

There really is not a big difference between these theories and Stalin's Diamat. Like Diamat, they are completely theoretical statements, that are not based in any historical generalizations. Furthermore, they present their own theories as the ultimate science, that could even explain the behaviours of other scientists. They present their critics as not only false but bourgeois, on the basis that their science is the perspective of the 'working-class'.

Perhaps that kind of intellectual self-confidence has its place in hard sciences. However, we know from the experiences of socialism in the 20th century that it leads to vanguardism in the political sphere.

By ‘vanguardism’, I mean the tendency of certain revolutionary intellectual groups to appoint themselves as the spokespeople for the working class, based on their privileged access to the truth. If that vanguard group manages to seize power in a country, they can then call themselves a ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, using Marx’s most destructive phrase. This allows them to say that they are a government by the Proletariat, when they are in fact a government by and for the vanguard class.

If, on the other hand, Marxists let go of their claim to being ‘scientific’, then it would be clear that government by vanguard is government by and for unelected officials, not by ‘the workers’. In other words, the use of the word ‘science’ in Marxist-inspired governments is a good example of how claims to knowledge are used to establish social power.

Just as the philosopher Michel Foucault often argued, it is instructive to look at the use of ‘knowledge’ in historical power struggles. The term ‘knowledge’ has been frequently used to justify oppression in the past few centuries. The establishment of ‘knowledge’ is a social process that Marxists themselves play a role in.

The term ‘science’ is ideal for totalitarian regimes because it has a connotation of absolute knowledge. Ironically, natural scientists themselves do not claim to have absolute knowledge. But it is undeniable that the connotation exists. When a government claims to have absolute knowledge over a subject, they are claiming that it is not a matter of debate. Thus, claiming that something is scientific can be a method of shutting down opposition to an idea. This is why Diamat was so important for Stalin in his attempt to stifle all opposition to his rule.

I would claim that ‘science’ can have a role in a truly democratic political discourse. But, only to the extent that we are talking about the natural sciences, such as medicine or physics. At the point that governments start to claim that they have a ‘scientific’ understanding of society or history, that’s when alarm bells should start ringing.

In order to think that you understand society or history scientifically, you essentially need to think that human beings behave predictably enough to model and predict their behavior. Regardless of whether that is achievable—and I doubt it—why would

you want to be able to do that? The reason is often the ‘will to power’: an attempt by an individual or group to exploit others.

For these reasons, the zombie of Karl Marx cannot fully live again. Every time a Marxist group comes back from the dead, they alienate people with their romanticization of dictatorships, and their arcane knowledge. And even when they take power, that isn’t a reason to celebrate, as the remaining Marxist regimes show.

I have one final example of arcane Marxist ‘science’ that we should dispatch with if we want to build a post-Marxist hegemony Frankenstein thing. We should absolutely rid ourselves of the Labor Theory of Value.

The Labor Theory of Value is the epitome of an arcane, supposedly ‘scientific’ Marxist idea. However, it leads to terrible economic analyses, which are currently just an inverted reflection of neoliberal economics.

The theory goes like this: in capitalism, goods exchange in proportion to the socially-necessary labor-time required for their construction. Not exactly the most thrilling Marxist idea, but its surprisingly important, so let me explain.

To exemplify the idea, let’s say it takes an average of 2 hours to make a sweater in our society, but only an average of 1 hour to make a sock. According to the Labor Theory of Value, the sweater would tend to cost the same as two socks. Simple enough.

On the basis of that theory, Karl Marx argued that he can scientifically ‘prove’ that workers are exploited by capitalists. He says that the Labor Theory of Value proves that labor is the source of all value. Because of this, Marx argues, the only way that capitalists can receive any profit is if they take some of the value that was created by their workers. Marx defines this value taken by capitalists as ‘surplus value’, and says that the process of surplus value extraction is therefore exploitation. It is the capitalists' robbery of the value created by the worker.

Neat theory. However, unfortunately, the Labor Theory of value is an empirically false theory. If the theory was true, then the more labor time it took to make something, the more that thing should cost. In reality though, the goods that cost the least are usually produced by the most labor-intensive industries, not—as the theory would predict—by the least labor-intensive industries.

Having realized this, various Marxist economists have made new versions of the Labor Theory of Value, which are not open to the same criticism. However, in order to do so, they have either adopted circular arguments or become very vague.

It is clear that Marxists are really trying to hold on to the theory so that the theory of exploitation has some scientific status when in reality it doesn't need one. If people feel like they're being exploited by capitalists, then maybe they are. We don't need to quantify it. We also don't need or want a vanguard group of social scientists to lead us to revolutionary victory.

This might sound like a small debate, but the entirety of Marxist economics is built on the Labor Theory of Value. On the basis of that assumption, Marxist economists have built quantitative models to predict the movements of capitalist economies. But these ultimately prove just as useless as the neoliberal economic models that they imitate. They have low success rates of predicting the future of capitalism, despite the cottage industry of left-wing economic soothsayers.

For true democracy to be possible, we don't need a small group who understand society 'scientifically' or even 'economically'. We need people to mostly govern themselves at the municipal level, and to make decisions for themselves, using the knowledge that the hard sciences actually bring us. In other words, we need the system that Marx called 'communism', that is: local government, in which the power of modern technology is submitted to the control of the locality. Perhaps this is the main idea that we need to take from the Zombie of Karl Marx.

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