THE END OF MARXISM AND SOCIALISM?

INTRODUCTION

This article is a reply to two books that argue the era of Marxism and socialism is over. The problem with these works is that they define aspects of the ideology of Marxism and socialism as being problematical and so conclude that their 'golden age' is over. In reply I will contend that the very continuation of capitalism means that Marxism and socialism are still relevant, even if it can also be decided that this standpoint has expressed serious flaws over the years. However the major issue that needs to be addressed is that of class struggle. If we decide that the class struggle cannot be rejuvenated and renewed it is not possible to conceive of the continued validity of Marxism and socialism. This does not mean that the logic of class struggle has an inherent tendency towards the goal of socialism, but rather that it has the potential to become transformed in a revolutionary manner that poses the possibility of the realisation of socialism. But it is also perfectly possible that class struggle will not go beyond reformists aims that do not attempt to end capitalism, and also it can be argued that in the contemporary world the class struggle is not powerful enough to establish revolutionary goals. In this manner, Marxism has become antiquated, and increasingly less relevant for the changing world of advanced capitalism. It is also argued by these books that we must also accept that there is no inherent logical connection between the aspirations of the class struggle and Marxism. The era of mass Marxist parties is over, and instead Marxism has been reduced to a preoccupation of the few. The apparently diminishing success of Marxism is connected by the authors to its apparent dogmatic character, and so they argue that a new ideology is needed in order to advance the goal of a post-capitalist society. This view has to be taken seriously because if we considered that it was true, we would have to replace the theoretical role of Marxism with the apparently superior ideology of radical emancipation. However, this view has to be scrutinised and evaluated. It is not sufficient to establish specific limitations with Marxism, instead we have to successfully outline why alternative ideologies are superior in terms of their ability to explain the world and also provide a strategy to change it. It is entirely possible that alternatives to Marxism are not successful in this regard, even if we accept that Marxism has serious limitations. But if we accept that Marxism has flaws, the question then becomes can they be resolved within the framework of this theory, or do we have to accept the necessity of its replacement with a different approach. It is not sufficient to suggest that Marxism has become unpopular, because it is possible to make suggestions as to how this situation can be overcome. Instead serious criticism of Marxism would imply that it is no longer appropriate for explaining the modern world and is unable to outline a valid strategy for the transformation of society. Hence criticism of Marxism has to suggest not only what it is against, but rather more importantly to establish its superior alternative. It is easy to make criticisms, what is more urgent is to outline the aspects of a theory that is able to go beyond the limitations of Marxism and so provide a genuine alternative that can inspire popular support. In contrast the supporters of Marxism must not be content with justifying dogmatic truisms, but instead they must provide effective arguments that outline why the alternatives proposed are still inferior to Marxism. Indeed, the very comparison of these rivals to Marxism is a good indication of the present state of the strength or weakness of this theoretical approach. It is only by means of comparison, rather than shielding Marxism from criticism that we are able to establish whether it still has an explanatory character. Consequently it is not sufficient to proclaim that Marxism is inherently more principled and revolutionary than rival theories. This point may be proved formally and yet is false in practice. Instead the ultimate test of the validity of Marxism is whether it is able to uphold the relationship of theory to practice. This point is serious, because with the degeneration of Stalinism it could be argued that Marxism was undermined and became the standpoint of intellectuals. However, despite the decline of Marxism nothing emerged to become a rival. This situation is now being rectified. Marxism has to prove itself against emerging and contending theories and strategies. Thus the dialogue of Marxism must be with these alternatives, it cannot be content with self-vindication or the application of dogma. Marxism is in ideological struggle with theories that aspire to go beyond its limitations.

Gabriel Kolko – After Socialism

Gabriel Kolko has argued that Marxism and socialism are finished. (1) He contends that the limitations of Marxism meant it was increasingly unable to understand society in a rational manner. It could not explain crisis, and its optimistic theory of history became increasingly discredited. He concludes: “Socialism has become dysfunctional as an instrument of analysis and change, but its goals – and most of these were never specific to it alone – remain as valid as ever.”(2) But, even if we accept the validity of these criticisms they do not prove whether Marxism is unable to be improved as a theory of society and strategy. Marxism may have serious flaws, but it is possible that they can be overcome with theoretical reflection. For example, the parties of the Second International in 1914 were disorientated because of the onset of the First World War, but this was offset by the attempt of Marxists to explain the situation and to renew the strategy of the overthrow of capitalism. Why is Marxism not capable of similar advance in the modern world? He outlines how capitalism still goes through crisis and is contradictory, but assumes the Marxist left can only understand this world in terms of myths, and he goes so far as to suggest that a valid, analytical and predictive social science has not existed. Hence he concludes that theory has been based on false hopes and deluding optimism. The failure of alternatives has only led to acceptance of the wisdom of the establishment and the discrediting of opposition to capitalism. This view may be true, but none of this critique is able to uphold the view that Marxism cannot be improved in order to sustain a more considered and reflective theory of social change.

Kolko argues that the Marxist dialectic of historical progress was unprepared for world war one. In fact this event led to the emergence of a revolutionary trend that rejected the evolutionary schemas of Kautsky, and advocated a new strategy of international revolution based on the intensification of the class struggle. Kolko considers that Marxism entered into a crisis in 1914 because its Hegelian doctrine of historical advance could not explain catastrophic developments like world war one. He also suggests that the Marxist view that crisis would be a prelude to revolutionary change was undermined by the development of reaction that followed world war one. Hence he does not allow for the fact that at least some Marxists tried to respond to this situation in a principled manner and developed theories and strategies which tried to be equal to this new catastrophic development. Their very ability to develop an explanation of inter-imperialist war, and the connected principled perspective of international revolution, indicated that the problem was not with Marxism which was still capable of analytical vigour and intransigent political positions, but instead the influence of nationalism which undermined the consistent application of Marxist principles. Marxism had been distorted by forms of national opportunism rather than being unable to explain this new tragic development in history. Thus International socialism had suffered a setback, but its theoretical capacity in the form of revolutionary Marxism was not undermined, and instead its approach was improved and able to explain the development of world war one in an analytical manner. The outcome of this ability to uphold Marxism in a difficult time was the October revolution. But Kolko only dismisses this event in terms of Bolshevism being the continuation of the crisis of Marxism. He cannot accept that the October revolution provided hope to the international working class of the promise of a better future. The crisis of the working class in 1914 had been changed into a situation of growing discontent and the intensification of class struggle. It is true that Bolshevism had retrogressive and bureaucratic features that undermined the emancipatory promise of proletarian revolution, but this aspect was offset by the increasing challenge to the domination of international capital. Thus Marxism could not be said to be in crisis when its message inspired mass struggle to overthrow capitalism. Only with the triumph of counter-revolutionary Stalinism did the emancipatory promise of Marxism become false, but the answer was not a new theory but instead the necessity of a new revival of revolutionary Marxism. The fact that this never happened led to an enduring crisis of the working class which undermined the possibility of genuine proletarian revolutions in the post-war era. Consequently, Stalinism was the repression of Marxism and meant a contradiction between Marxist theory – which continued in limited forms – and practice. The reason for this situation was not limitations of Marxist theory, but instead because empirical practice undermined the integrity of the theory. Marxism was falsified by a post-revolutionary regime.

Kolko considers that Marxism as it developed in terms of the influence of Hegel had a complex political economy, and a rigid determinism of progress which could not explain catastrophic and changing events. This meant the future was one of inevitable certainty and not one of complexity. The possibility of socialism was the outcome of an inexorable natural economic process, and not as the expression of the will of individuals. This meant Marxism ignored events like wars and the possibility of setbacks that could seriously undermine the realisation of the aims of socialism: “One simply cannot calculate history in terms of the development of the productive forces, its “laws of motion” from which class struggles evolved. This vision of the progressive development of capitalism to socialism as a consequence of fairly predictable economic processes is a comforting myth but exceedingly poor history and prognosis.”(3) This criticism is connected to the view that it was an illusion to assume 'there is a collective consciousness among workers which at the critical moment would eventually cause them to act in unison to overthrow capitalism and create a classless society.'(4) Kolko accepts the actuality of working class discontent, but disputes that this means the expression of a logic towards aspiring to realise socialism.

Kolko is right to suggest that there are no inherent tendencies within capitalism which make for a process of inexorable transition to socialism. Hence Marx's Capital is wrong on this point. But the central point of Capital is that the working class is exploited by capital, and this standpoint has important economic validity. In this sense his approach is superior to traditional bourgeois political economy: “Marx rejects Smith's idea that the part of surplus value which is converted into capital goes to the workers. Marx points out that surplus value is, rather, partly consumed by the capitalist as revenue and partly reinvested in the form of capital. He suggests more generally that classical political economy never grasped reproduction, since it failed to comprehend the way value is created.”(5) Hence Marx's approach was superior to bourgeois political economy because its adherents could not systematically explain the relations of exploitation which led to the generation of surplus value. Marx was also perceptive to consider this the objective basis of class struggle. His 'Capital' did seem to suggest that this situation would inexorably result in socialism, but his theory of ideology explains how the bourgeois ideas which dominate society will result in the undermining of the simple and progressive realisation of class conflict. Hence if we connect all the various aspects of Marx's theory it does not crudely suggest a dynamic of change from capitalism to socialism. Instead Marx is aware of the resistance of the bourgeoisie and the reformist illusions of the workers. Thus Kolko is making a simplification when he criticises Marx for failing to 'prepare his followers for the political and social options the ruling class might resort to, and he had no inkling whatsoever of the self-serving, arbitrary and authoritarian behaviour of the leaders of the proletariat.”(6) In relation to the latter point, Marx was critical of the state socialism of Lassalle and the elitism of Bakunin, and was aware that this type of leadership could undermine the development of the class struggle. He was also aware of the repressive machinations of the ruling class as his writings on the Paris Commune made apparent. Thus he did not have a naïve view of the class struggle based on crude economics or illusory conceptions of historical progress.

In contrast, Kolko argues that Marx had an abstract conception of the proletariat which obeyed economic laws, and so ignored the actual complexities of class consciousness, and he did not have an adequate theory of politics or the state. The result of these limitations was a failure to understand and react to world war one, and from that time Marxism developed as a political failure. The various forms of socialism have not been able to challenge capitalism effectively and in a flexible, but principled manner. However, what Kolko is describing is the political limitations of the practice of socialism. This is not identical to the supposed flaws in Marxism. Indeed it can be argued that at various times, such as the First World War and the post-war intellectual revival, Marxism has been able to provide convincing theories of society and made important contributions to strategy. It is also important to note that what are described as flaws in Marxist theory, such as concerning the state, are actually outlined in an incomplete and unfinished manner. Kolko's criticism implies that Marx should have presented a complete theory that was able to provide answers to any questions. But no theory can provide this type of sophistication, instead it must have unfinished and dogmatic aspects, which is precisely why all theories are liable to the process of revision and improvement. The fact that Marxism was often in this state does not invalidate it, and it was precisely why people such as Kautsky, Luxemburg, and Lenin provided elaboration. Instead of this recognition of the possibilities to develop Marxist theory, Kolko comprehends the German Social Democratic Party as an immense bureaucratic structure, and even its gifted leaders like Rosa Luxemburg were considered to be based on a flawed version of Marxism that attempted to combine laws of historical necessity with the role of voluntarism. The optimism encouraged by dogmatic Marxism was undermined by the advent of the First World War, and German Social democracy was then in a perpetual crisis. It was unable to intervene in a principled manner in German politics. (But individuals like Lenin understood this situation.) However the reason for this debacle was not the apparent limitations of Marxism, as Kolko claims, but instead the very rejection of Marxism in favour of national opportunism.

Lenin understood that Marxism was based on proletarian internationalism and this had to be upheld if a principled strategy of international revolution was to be developed. He argued: “Advocacy of class collaboration; abandonment of the idea of socialist revolution and revolutionary methods of struggle; adaptation to bourgeois nationalism....renunciation of the class viewpoint and the class struggle....such, doubtlessly, are the ideological foundations of opportunism.”(7) Thus Lenin indicated that adherence to proletarian internationalism meant recognition that the class struggle is the most important factor in history. This principle had been undermined by the actions of social democracy. In order to outline how the practice of social democracy was against the principles of Marxism, Lenin wrote a short introduction to the ideas of Marx.(8) Lenin established a major innovation when he implied that the question of the character of history is not primarily defined by the productive forces, which had enabled the German Social Democrats to justify defence of German imperialism, but instead is understood by the role of the class struggle: “It is common knowledge that, in any given society, the strivings of some of its members conflict with the strivings of others, that social life is full of contradictions, and that history reveals a struggle between nations and societies, and besides, an alternation of periods of revolution and reaction, peace and war, stagnation and rapid progress or decline. Marxism has provided the guidance, i.e., the theory of the class struggle, for the discovery of the laws governing this seeming maze and chaos.”(9)

All justifications of history based on evolution, the dynamics of the productive forces, and historical progress are replaced with the uncertainty of the class struggle. This standpoint is also the only principled basis for Marxist politics, and represents opposition to the capitulation to all types of national opportunism. In this context it is necessary to understand Marx's economic theory. He outlines how capital exploits the surplus labour of the proletariat, and Lenin formally accepts that economic development creates the conditions for socialism, but he differentiates between these conditions which imply the inevitability of the transformation of capitalism from the implied uncertainty of the political struggle: “The intellectual and moral motive force and the physical executor of this transformation is the proletariat, which has been trained by capitalism itself. The proletariat's struggle against the bourgeoisie, which finds expression in a variety of forms ever richer in content, inevitably becomes a political struggle directed towards the conquest of political power by the proletariat (the “dictatorship of the proletariat”)”(10) Despite the view that this struggle will result in inevitable victory there is also the assumption that setbacks are possible. Contingency can result in defeat, and only the highest level of class consciousness can bring about victory over capital. The working class can be undermined by illusions in nationalism, or the role of the state, and the influence of bourgeois ideology can undermine the cohesion of the workers. Lenin emphasised the uncertainties of the class struggle in terms of the necessity to develop the correct tactics if victory is to be assured.

In other words, Lenin modifies the objectivism of Marx's original theory and provides an understanding of the importance of the class struggle. The character of historical materialism, or at least its criteria of progress, is defined by the question of the success that has been achieved in the class struggle. The opportunism of social democracy is defined by the fact that it has contributed to the defeat of the international proletariat during the First World War. This is why Marxism has to be renewed by emphasising the importance of the international class struggle and rejecting any notion of support for national defencism. This renewal of a principled approach is upheld until the period of the final triumph of Stalinism. The domination of Stalinism led to the re-emergence of defence of bourgeois democracy and peace as being more important than world revolution. This also meant the defence of the USSR became more important than world revolution. But of crucial importance was the fact that the USSR could no longer be described as a workers state. This meant its foreign policy aims could only express the interests of the Soviet elite. The degeneration of the two forms of Marxism, social democracy and Bolshevism, meant it could no longer be expressed by them. But this did not mean that the Bolshevism of Lenin was discredited, or that Marxism had become exhausted by these developments. Instead creative Marxism assumed marginal forms and its ability to unite theory and practice was ended. Hence Marxism did not become a discredited theory, instead it could be argued that its creative potential was undermined by the important degeneration of what had been mass Marxist parties. The working class continued to struggle, and the Spanish revolution was an expression of the spontaneous dynamic of the proletariat in opposition to both Stalinism and social democracy. It could be argued that the class struggle continued despite the effective demise of Marxist politics. This very fact proved that Marxism did not invent the class struggle and instead in its golden era tried to understand it.

Kolko dismisses the whole experience of Bolshevism in terms of the authoritarianism and ambition of Lenin. He glosses over the importance of the role of the working class in Russia and instead argues that the Bolsheviks manipulated the Soviets for their own ends. The result was the creation of a society that was elitist and bureaucratic from birth. Hence both sections of mass Marxism – Social democratic and Bolshevik – were bureaucratic and hierarchical. The Communist Parties had a principled role during the period of the wartime resistance, but generally they have been led by pro-Soviet opportunists. However, even if we accept this analysis as accurate, which it is not, how can we blame Marx and Engels for what happened? Instead fallible human beings presided over Marxist parties, like Kautsky and Lenin, and then Stalinism developed, and the result was that Marxism was transformed from a theory of capitalism and strategy of proletarian revolution, into an elite ideology. Kolko suggests that Marxism after 1945 was largely uninspired, which seems a harsh conclusion. The only person he has time for is Gramsci. He has little time for the New Left of the 1960's and concludes: “Socialism as an idea in all its forms, whether Marxist, Social democratic or Bolshevik, has ceased to be a mobilizing ideology throughout the world, and the belief that egalitarianism is a socially desirable goal has perished with it.”(11) Kolko is right to suggest that there has been a protracted crisis of Marxism, but the fact is that no radical ideology has emerged to rival its intellectual ambitions. Instead Marxism has been transformed and revised in order to make it relevant for the contemporary age. Hence there have been endless interpretations of what Marx really said, or explicit attempts to make it pragmatic and realistic, such as market socialism. But the actual development of a new social theory that is genuinely post-Marxist has not been developed. Instead Kolko's is one of the first. But before we attempt to subject his approach to critical scrutiny, it is necessary to assess one of the most recent attempts to make Marxism relevant. This is the activist attempt to connect Marxism with the struggle against neo-liberalism. This study will indicate whether Marxism is still practical and theoretically ambitious, or whether it is stale and parasitic in relation to new struggles. The approach of Kolko would imply that Marxism is historically exhausted. But this is not true in terms of its dynamic theorising, and so the question is whether this aspect is reproduced in practical terms. However, the continued validity of Marxism would depend on whether it can establish that the proletariat is still a major social force. If this point can be proved it is possible to argue that the claims of its theory have related practical relevance.

This point can be analysed in relation to a recent attempt to make Marxism relevant in relation to the struggle against neo-liberalism.(12) The authors consider that the situation is favourable for struggle against the austerity imposed by neo-liberalism, but they define the forces that can engage in opposition to the latest form of capitalism as subaltern, and therefore composed of working class, women, oppressed racial groups, gays and lesbians and indigenous peoples.(13) This conception of the forces for changing structures is welcome to the extent that it enhances our understanding of the broad character of the possible opposition to neo-liberalism and capitalism. The authors define themselves as activists who are attempting to provide guidance to those in struggle, but the crucial issue is: what is the goal of the forces of opposition to the system? What does it mean to obtain success in the struggle against the forces of capitalism? Is socialism still a major goal? The authors suggest that Marxism can be orientated to real practical problems and so has an emphasis on social change. But what does this mean? There are many types of change and some are more limited than others. The traditional Marxist view is that all change is inadequate if it does not lead to the formation of a commune state which can advance the prospect of socialism and communism. There is much mention by the authors of the relation of theory to practice, of knowledge based on experience, of changing worlds, but all this is vague unless their aim is made explicit. What should be the result of struggle? Furthermore, there is criticism of the traditional tendency of Marxism to relate to struggle in contemplative rather than activist terms, but the problem of activism is that we can accommodate to the spontaneous illusions of the struggle and accept its ideological limitations and connected reluctance to directly challenge the domination of capitalism. However, the authors seem to reject these problems and instead assume that activist Marxism can promote struggles to develop anti-capitalist objectives. We can learn from the very experience of Marx and Engels that “The more subaltern groups became conscious of their needs and experiences and reflected on their attempts to act, the more they developed their collective practice....Finally, this developmental process led to deeper and deeper challenges to the current structures of society......and ultimately to a struggle over....the way in which society produces and reproduces itself.”(14)

This dynamic may have had validity, but it still glosses over the ultimate aim of the process of collective praxis. Without this clarity it seems that the very role of struggle is what is primarily important, and so the goal of this process becomes obscured. Hence, although they attempt to reconstruct Marx's theory of struggle based on the aspiration to realise needs and capacities, we are still not sure what is the historical significance of this collective activity. The character of praxis is defined in terms of humans achieving their species being, but this is just a philosophical conception that explains the dynamism of activity when the issue of the goal of this activity is still not outlined. Instead it would seem that the very goal is praxis itself: “Praxis is therefore a dynamo of change that perennially engenders new needs and new capacities for the satisfaction of those needs.”(15) This definition can explain human productive activity, but it does not establish how this praxis aspect of our human condition is connected to the aim of transcending capitalism and establishing communism. The authors do mention that structures can encourage or constrain change. But the question that is still unanswered concerns what is the purpose of trying to overcome the limitations of structures, such as capitalist relations of production? The conclusion made by the authors in relation to the prospects of transformation of society is pessimistic. They suggest that the primary result of struggle within society is that: “Subaltern groups....will tend to seek to lessen the burden of domination and to carve out a space for the satisfaction of their needs within the parameters of a given social formation.”(16) This point is generally true, but Marx recognised the limitations of this acceptance of domination and instead was concerned with how this situation could be overcome. The authors accept that the development of radical needs implies the possibility of subaltern groups challenging the existing system in order to realise them. But the dynamic of praxis and struggle is not outlined in terms of the ultimate victory over capital. On the contrary it is considered in terms of the particular victories of community groups in countries like Ireland. The question of actually transcending capitalism is obscured and evaded, and instead the dynamism of struggle is considered in more limited terms. Consequently, structural change is defined in the following vague manner: “Such transformations occur when subaltern groups develop new meanings and values, new practices and new kinds of relationship around emergent structures of radical needs and capacities – those whose satisfaction and deployment challenges the continued existence of a dominant structure of entrenched needs and capacities – and pursue the realisation of this emergent structure through mobilisation and collective action.”(17)

This comment describes quite eloquently the character of the praxis involved in the struggle against existing and dominant structures. But the issue of what can result from struggle is avoided and instead the concept of an emergent structure is vague and unsatisfactory. The process of struggle is explained and elaborated, but the definite aims of this struggle are evaded and it could ultimately be argued that the question of radical needs could be realised within a changing form of capitalism. In contrast, the perspective of traditional Marxism is to replace capitalism with a commune state which has the dynamic of developing a socialist economy and communist society. The authors do not explicitly reject these aims, but nor do they advocate or elaborate them. Hence it could be argued that this evasion is because of an adaptation to the ideologies of the existing praxis of subaltern groups. The very task of Marxism is to suggest that new social movements adopt the aim of socialism, but in the name of supporting praxis this aim is not adopted by the authors. Instead their aims seem to be vague in order to adapt to the scepticism about socialism that is prevalent within the emerging new social movements and subaltern groups. This criticism does not mean that the authors do not display awareness of the contradictory character of the subaltern groups in terms of their challenge to the dominant structure of needs and adaptation to this structure.(18) Such an ability to describe the strengths and weaknesses of oppositional groups within society is not being subject to criticism. The authors are able to explain how apparently modest struggles can become projects that aspire to realise more radical aims. However, the problem is that the question of what is a radical aim is not elaborated. Therefore there is a tendency to describe various militant struggles as radical, but the problem is that these struggles in and of them do not necessarily have the capacity to change and transform society. The authors do accept that certain protest movements have the capacity and awareness to challenge the dominant structures of society, but what does this mean? The point is that the success of these movements can only occur when revolutionary transformation occurs and the development of a new society has begun. Instead of making this strategic conclusion the authors support the vague slogan of the protestors, which is 'Another World is possible'(19). This conclusion seems justified in terms of the transformation of protestors’ consciousness in the process of struggle. Consequently, it is argued that the struggles themselves can produce adequate leaders who are able to formulate principled demands better than elite groups, e.g. Marxist parties. (20) But the very importance of the Marxist parties is that they can connect the various struggles with the aim of socialism. Without this theoretical intervention, the actual demands of the protest movements are reformist and adopt a militant posture within capitalism. A type of Marxism that accommodates to this situation can only reinforce illusions that militant demands can be realised within existing structures. The point is that the concept of radical social change is inadequate unless it is connected to the aim of socialism. This is the political truth that the authors attempt to evade.

The strong point of the book is when it explains the history of capitalism and the emergence of the post-war compromise between capital and labour. It explains that this compromise has been replaced with neo-liberalism and the offensive of capital against labour. The situation of crisis and the austerity regimes have and will promote movements of opposition. But the authors raise the vital question that these movements have not been able to realise change. The system of Neo-liberalism still seems very dominant. They suggest that important questions have been raised about what we mean by collective agency. The strategic issue is posed accurately in terms of how to develop large scale trans-national movements for change.(21) It is argued that the system is not without its vulnerable aspects that promote the possibility of change, but the authors are also aware of important ideological limitations of the participants of many struggles which is described as 'fear of Leninism': “One concern when people talk about winning is the 'fear of Leninism': the assumption that winning means a military insurrection which would inevitably lead to an authoritarian state.”(22) But the opposition to revolutionary change is not simply because of the fear of violence or concerns about the development of a repressive state. These questions are ultimately raised because people are sceptical about the possibility of creating valid economic and political alternatives to capitalism. They do not support socialism, even if they are opposed to the injustices generated by capitalism. It is the task of Marxism to outline convincing conceptions of socialism that will indicate that it is a practical and feasible society. Instead of attempting to address this major concern about alternatives to capitalism, the authors advocate the practical approach of good relations between Marxist groups and activists. This is a serious point. But these constructive alliances will not in themselves address the questions that activists have about the process of revolution and alternatives to capitalism. It is still necessary to conduct ideological struggle to gain increasing acceptance of the objective of communism. Such a task is effectively denied by the authors. They consider that united struggle will resolve these types of issues.

The authors do criticise the view that self-limiting change is sufficient. But what does this suggest? It implies that it is necessary to struggle for the alternative society. Finally the authors advocate a popular revolutionary change: “This tends to give rise to self-management in workplaces and direct democracy in communities, while on a wider scale it has usually been connected with a strong internationalism, a refusal of racism and advances in women's power.”(23) The problem is that this definition is vague, and therefore could be describing a temporary situation or a period of dual power between rulers and dominated, rather than the conditions involved in the construction of a new type of society. This caution seems to be justified given that community mass mobilisations in the Republic of Ireland are described in these revolutionary terms. Hence it does not seem a trivial omission that the authors are reluctant to describe the social alternative to capitalism as being socialism or communism. Instead the very emphasis on praxis and struggle becomes the basis to effectively reject the importance of socialism. In this sense the authors effectively accommodate to the scepticism of the activists concerning the traditional goals of Marxism. They warn against a strategy of integration with the existing state, but do not provide an effective strategic alternative in terms of the goal of socialism. Instead Marxism is diluted to mean articulating forms of popular agency, but the aim of this approach remains obscure. The authors outline how Marxism should advise rather than dominate new social movements. This is a principled and non-sectarian approach. But what is the theoretical content of this advice? They warn against Marxism being reduced to anti-intellectualism, but this is the tendency of their own approach. Hence they define revolution in terms of the extent to which popular power is realised, but what does this mean? (24) Does it mean the possibility of change within capitalism, or the necessity of an alternative social system? The activist preoccupations of the authors mean that they reduce the concept of change to the vague term of popular power. This could mean very different things to different people. They define change in terms of 'popular participation in shaping society'. (25) This definition could be an evasion and a terminological exercise to avoid the issues of socialism and communism. Their standpoint does not seem to represent a principled alternative for those who are concerned about the possible 'costs' of revolution. Instead the merit of 'popular power' is that it can mean many different things.

Consequently, it is not surprising that the character of struggle and the new society is reduced to the moral principle of solidarity. This is the conclusion from the perspective that we make our own history. Instead of finally articulating the goal as socialism and communism, the concluding comments of the book are: “As we become political subjects on our own behalf, recognise ourselves in each other and see the connections between different movements, we come closer to being able not only to articulate the hope of 'another world' but also to bring it about.”(26) This sentimental interpretation of Marxism seems vacuous rather than precise. Marxism has to some extent been made more relevant for developing political relations with new social movements, but the cost has been to undermine its theoretical and strategic clarity. So, on the one hand the praxis interpretation of Marxism has meant that it is able to relate to the new social movements and their attempt to develop popular forms of power. On the other hand the traditional aims of Marxism have been seriously compromised and diluted. This has meant that Marxism becomes reduced to an ideology of activism and its distinct character is undermined and replaced with a standpoint that accepts the prevailing scepticism about the objectives of communism. Furthermore, the hegemonic role of the working class is replaced with an alliance of subaltern groups. This perspective is not necessarily opportunist if the revolutionary aims of Marxism are upheld and defended. But instead of this approach the goal of revolution and communism is replaced by the vague notion of popular power. In this sense a process of revisionism of Marxism has occurred which is meant to make it relevant, but also the possibility of the reconciliation of praxis struggles with the interests of the ruling class becomes justified.

The point being made is that whilst it is necessary to continue to make Marxism relevant as a theory and practice this development should not be at the expense of its traditional aims. This view does not mean that Marxism should be upheld as a dogma, but rather that the new concept of popular power is an inadequate alternative to capitalism. The most principled and credible alternative to capitalism is still expressed by the aim of establishing a new mode of production which we can define as socialism. It is true that this perspective has been undermined in the past by repressive and bureaucratic practices, but this does not mean that a superior alternative to capitalism has arisen. Instead we have to ensure that the attempt to develop socialism does conform to the principles of popular power in the future. If we reject the aim of socialism because of objections of activists we risk justifying a perspective that reconciles our grievances with the continuation of capitalism. In this context it is also not sufficient to support the vague conception of 'Another World Is Possible'. This is because the question remains what type of society is represented by this phrase? The only principled answer to this important question is socialism. However, when trying to define socialism we should not be content to utilise the views of Marx and Engels. Instead we should elaborate what socialism is in imaginative terms, and in this context utilise the experiences of activists in the recent period. Marxists should aim to elaborate the most democratic conception of socialism and avoid justification of one party rule. In this sense the concerns of activists about the possibility of the bureaucratic domination of post-capitalist society will have been addressed in theoretical terms.

However despite these criticisms, the authors are right to suggest that Marxism should attempt to influence rather than dominate struggles. Nor should Marxism adapt to the struggles in the form of anti-intellectualism. It is necessary to develop the right mixture of advice without arrogance or excessive humility. In this manner, Marxism can still be relevant for the new forms of struggles which will emerge in the present period. But we still expect the working class to be hegemonic not because of dogmatic reasoning but instead because the very exploitative character of capitalism means that it remains the major oppositional force. In this sense the aim will be to promote alliances between the working class and the other subaltern groups. We are aware that influences of ideology often mean that the working class can be a reactionary force that supports the defence of the system. This is why Marxism has a crucial role in promoting ideological struggle in order to obtain working class support for opposing capitalism. In this sense Marxism still has a vital role. But the authors to some extent underestimate this task because they conceive of reality in terms of constant struggles by the new social movements. Thus they underestimate the acceptance of austerity by the working class and imply that revolutions are a constant feature of social reality. Instead revolutions are rare and have often failed because of unfavourable circumstances. Hence, the role of Marxism is to promote new optimism that revolutions in the future can be successful and end the system of exploitation. The authors are optimistic about the development of popular struggle but they share the reticence of the activists about the possible failure of revolution. This type of pessimism has to be rejected. We can learn from the past and act to bring about a truly emancipatory society.

Kolko outlines his alternative basis for the development of theories based on the role of rationality and the pursuit of the truth, and opposition to absolute certainty and dogma. This approach would allow for the unexpected and be able to explain what theories like Marxism have been unable to understand such as war. The assumption is that Marxism has not been an approach based on innovation. This view is questionable because it was able to orientate itself in order to provide a theoretical basis to understand the First World War. But this major argument about the limitations of Marxism is not theoretical, but rather outlines in practice how Leninism resulted in authoritarian regimes and Stalinism was inefficient and led to the restoration of capitalism. (27) His conclusion is that socialism has failed as a movement and has been unable to achieve its objectives, whether in a social democratic or revolutionary form. Yet he also argues that capitalism is a failure because it continually generates war, creates poverty, and is based on the corruption of state elites. However socialism has not acted to bring about the necessary change and transformation of capitalism: “That innumerable socialist and social democratic parties have shown faint-heartedness in the face of great challenges, or share a far greater consensus in power than differences with the parties that proceeded them, does not require repeating. Socialist parties have failed to transform old orders and challenges and have not been effective vehicles for radically altering the world's course.”(28) For example there has been a failure of social democracy to react to changing situations since 1914. This is why a radical alternative movement must outline what constitutes both success and failure. A radical party needs to be guided by moral values and reject fascination with power. Parties of opposition should not become an expression of ambition of a few individuals.

Kolko's critique of the Left is precise and often convincing. But if he is still in favour of the traditional goals of socialism why do we need to reject the label of socialism? Why is it not possible to improve socialism in the manner he advises without trying to suggest that the term socialist be replaced by some different name, or alternative definition of what we stand for? It is true that Marxism would be improved by becoming more flexible and receptive to changes within the world. Doctrinal certainty needs to be rejected. But is there an alternative to Marxism? Kolko has not established the reasons why it should be replaced. His own study of capitalism could be perfectly compatible with Marxism. He is against authoritarian parties, but there is nothing to suggest that Marx would support this development. Nor can we guarantee that a post-socialist party would not become authoritarian. The major aspect of Kolko's critique is his opposition to the role of social democracy for managing capitalism, but this action has nothing to do with the principles of socialism. Instead it suggests that we should re-define socialism without the influence of social democracy.

What indicates that Kolko ultimately supports the continuation of the vision of socialism is indicated by the following comment: “The vitality of a socialist vision of an equitable distribution of wealth and income is not that it is a perfect way to organize an economic system but that it is by far preferable given the alternatives, their impact on human and social forms and above all else, their consequences for peace or war in the future.”(29) This affirmation of support for the goal of socialism indicates that his implicit intention is to improve the theory and practice of socialist organisations. If necessary he seems to be in favour of new socialist parties that can strive for this aim in a more principled and efficient manner. However, he indicates that most existing socialist organisations are based on an ineffective ideology of determinism and a lack of imagination. This may be true but the answer is not to reject socialism but instead to strive for theoretical and organisational improvement. However his answer to this point is that Leninism and social democracy – the major expression of socialism – has been responsible for historic failures. However the apparent inability of socialist organisations to advance the cause of human emancipation is not a principled justification to reject socialism. (This point is reinforced by Kolko's continued support for the aims of socialism) Instead what is suggested is a new form of improved socialism that is more effective in the struggle for human emancipation. This development would be based on the suggestions that Kolko has made about developing theory and practice. But it would be dogmatic and problematical to reject socialism because of what has been said and done in its name. Instead socialism remains relevant – as Kolko admits – because of the limitations of capitalism. Hence what is called for is the renewal of socialism in order to enhance the struggle to overthrow capitalism and bring about socialism.

AFTER MARXISM

Ronald Aronson wrote a book: “After Marxism' which argues that Marxism is over as a strategy of emancipation and conception of the future society.(30) His initial standpoint is that Marxism as a theory of the class struggle has failed. The working class has not become revolutionary, and the so-called socialist states always had serious flaws: “As a project of social transformation based on a union of theory and practice, Marxism concerns itself with a given state of affairs that is in the process of being radically transformed. As such, it is both a historically based comprehension of what is happening and a guide to make it happen. Thus it is not simply a description of a given social reality or an idea of a better social reality, but a theoretical and practical guide of the transformation of the one into the other. Its claims to validity are dependent on the realization of the entire process and project. Thus, if after a reasonable length of time, socialism has been nowhere achieved, if world-historical trends are moving away from, rather than moving toward, socialism, these facts can only undermine Marxism's claim to be true.”(31)

This view equates the apparent ability of the forces of capital to withstand opposition, and the connected failure to build socialist societies, with the discrediting of Marxism. However such a conclusion would be principled only if it could convincingly show that Marxism could no longer explain this adverse development of the class struggle. Marxism would also be undermined if the working class could be rejected in sociological terms as a credible force for social transformation. But this is not what Aronson is claiming. Instead he is suggesting that the ascendency of capital in the recent period requires a new strategy of emancipation. But the same objections could be made against the new formulation of a strategy of change. It could be argued that capitalism is able to undermine any attempted development to change society. Thus the principled response is not to reject Marxism, but instead develop its sophistication and ability to respond to the arguments of those that defend the status quo. Aronson suggests that the major practical problem is the decreasing size and influence of the industrial working class, or its integration into capitalism because of consumerism. This implies the economic conditions for the end of the Marxist project. However, nothing has arisen to replace this project. The alliance of new social movements has shown promise but not materialised. Hence the rejection of Marxism means the effective rejection of any credible strategy of emancipation. Furthermore, only Marxism connected the struggles taking place under capitalism with the goal of socialism. If Marxism is rejected we are left with reformism and the advocacy of more limited goals. Hence it is not surprising that many post-socialists advocate a caring capitalism. It is still only Marxism that connects the discontent which occurs under capitalism with the purpose of socialism. The alternative of new forms of struggle for socialism has not materialised since the demise of the influence of Marxism. Therefore what this indicates is that we require the development of an honest Marxism that is able to respond theoretically to the challenges posed by the apparent durability of capitalism. In contrast, it would be a retreat to reject Marxism in the name of innovation and as a response to the victory of capital over labour in the class struggle. It is true that there is a crisis of Marxism because of the apparent ability of capital to withstand opposition and Marxist theorists have often been complacent about this crisis. But it is not principled to conclude that the way to resolve this crisis is to reject Marxism. Instead we should attempt to resolve the crisis by studying capitalism and the class struggle and by attempting to be innovative. The previously mentioned attempt by Marxists to relate to new social movements is one of those attempts. But we should go further than activism in order to be theoretically imaginative and be prepared to analyse all aspects of the validity of Marxism.

Aronson maintains that Marxism is based on the perspective of class struggle and the prospect of proletarian revolution. But what happens if workers lack the unity, self-confidence or consciousness to realise this goal? The fact that these revolutions have not occurred means that serious questions can be raised about Marx's view that connected the exploitative condition of labour with the possibility of revolutionary transformation. Consequently, the character of Marxism as a historical project with the goal of socialism can be questioned. Indeed, the forces that uphold the aims of Marxism are increasingly diminished in the modern world and this situation is promoted by changes within capitalism itself. The working class of many advanced capitalist countries has won material gains and welfare improvements. The class structure is increasingly complex and society is no longer polarised between bourgeoisie and proletariat. Furthermore, the industrial working class is generally smaller and less important within society and new social groups have emerged that represent the potential of opposition to the system. The response of Marxism to this situation is unimaginative and they continually predict economic crisis will transform working class consciousness. This has not happened. Instead Marxism is reduced to hope that class struggle will revive, or a faith in revolution: “Its hopes are based on abstractions and memories, not on living, breathing workers, movements, and parties.”(32)

This analysis raises serious questions about the continuing validity and effectiveness of Marxism. Aronson has indicated that Marxists have often responded to the complexities of the political situation in a dogmatic manner, and have relied upon the comforting assurances of political economy in order to predict the future possibility of revolutionary change. The extent of the regression of the class consciousness of the working class has not been recognised by Marxists. For example a populist alliance has been formed in the UK between sections of the working class and middle class which is xenophobic and nationalist with regard to membership of the EU. Support for the Labour Party has been reduced to a small minority. Within the advanced capitalist countries the ideological support for capitalism is strong and the influence of the working class has been reduced by economic changes. The trade unions have been put on the defensive and seem increasingly unable to protect their members from the effects of the offensive of capital, or the neo-liberal project. However, despite these serious problems, can it be suggested that the working class is no longer capable of acting as a collective social force? The very development of capitalism still creates workplaces based on collective production. Hence, strikes still occur and the working class is still potentially the major social force opposed to the aims of capital. But the problem is primarily that of ideology. Many working people accept the aims of bourgeois political economy and so do not support opposition to the system. The influence of nationalism is greater than ever and this undermines the prospect of developing international unity against capitalism. For example, the possibility to strive for the Socialist United States of Europe is undermined by nationalism. In this situation Marxism has attempted to re-establish its practical relevance by associating with the issues concerning the new social movements. This development has led to limited success. But the question of effective social transformation still depends on mobilising the support of the working class. However, this is a problematical issue for the reasons given. Despite these difficulties the answer is not to reject Marxism, but instead to attempt to develop its theoretical capacities. A contemporary Marxism would attempt to seriously address the issues raised by Aronson and also relate to the role of activist Marxism in promoting new forms of struggle. What we have learnt from history is that any conception of the inevitability of revolution and socialism has been discredited by events. The economic development of capitalism only partially creates the conditions for socialism. The most important aspect is the willingness of the working class to promote this goal. Without this aspect capitalism will continue. Also, the representatives of capital are determined and resolute defenders of their system. They will not allow capitalism to quietly be replaced by socialism. Instead it is still a basic truth that only determined class struggle will bring about the realisation of a historical alternative. However the difficulties involved in developing support for this historical project, as identified by Aronson, do not mean that Marxism is over. Indeed it is determinist to argue that the era of Marxism is over. It is quite possible that strikes and mass discontent with austerity could change this situation of marginalisation. However, the question would then become: how can we translate this discontent into a successful attempt to realise socialism? This was the question that periods of intense class struggle in the past were never able to resolve.

Aronson also considers the demise of the Soviet Union as the end of the historical project of Marxism. (33) This is how these events have generally been interpreted. But it is wrong. The USSR did not have a social connection with socialism for a long period of time. It was an opponent of any genuine attempt at proletarian revolution. The military expansion of the USSR did not result in the liberation of the working class. However, for obvious reasons the ideology of the USSR meant that it was associated with Marxism. What actually happened was the demise of Stalinism. In the long-term this means the possibility of the renewal of Marxism in both Eastern Europe and on a global scale. But the very association of Marxism with Stalinism has discredited the former and created formidable ideological difficulties about its revival. Marxism has become considered to be an ideology that justifies authoritarianism and one party rule. Thus it is opposed by many people as the justification of Stalinism. Only the increasing difficulties of developing capitalism in Eastern Europe and the USSR will create the possibility for the renewal of Marxism, but this process will also take the patient study of Marxism in order to end its ideological association with Stalinism.

Aronson suggests that Lenin revised Marxism successfully to mean adherence to revolution led by a vanguard elite.(34) This view has some merit, but it ignores the fact that the October revolution could only occur on the basis of the role of the Soviets, or the genuine mass institutions of the working class. Lenin also considered that the centralised role of the party meant a commune state could not be realised and instead a bureaucratic workers state was formed. He was also concerned to tackle the role of the party within the state. However, it was true that for many different reasons genuine proletarian revolution could not occur in Russia. Aronson is content to suggest that Leninism led to Stalinism, but he ignores the essential difference which was that Lenin genuinely supported the development of international revolution. For various reasons, Stalin undermined this possibility and the requirements of class struggle were subordinated to the diplomatic aims of the USSR. Hence Stalinism actually represented the deepening of a crisis of Marxism - which begun in 1914 - because it suppressed the goal of proletarian revolution in the interests of the ruling elite in the USSR. In contrast, Aronson identifies Marxism with Stalinism and implies that Marx is complicit in the creation of many reactionary regimes. This standpoint is an extension of his view that Leninism led to Stalinism. But despite this view that Marx has some responsibility for the formation of regimes based on human suffering, Aronson still suggests that the demise of Marxism results in a sense of loss, and it seems that there is no longer any collective project for human emancipation. (35)

This analysis is confused. Marxism is equated with any regime that describes itself as Marxist. Surely the objective test of that claim is whether it is genuinely democratic and advances the possibility of realising a classless society? In this sense Stalinism could not be described as Marxist. Indeed, ultimately Stalinism contributed to the very stability of world capitalism. The only possibility for principled proletarian revolution would have to take an anti-Stalinist form, as with the formation of the Hungarian workers councils in 1956. If it could be outlined convincingly that Marxism led to Stalinism it would be necessary to argue in favour of an alternative and more principled theory of human emancipation. But Marx's writings on the Paris Commune indicate that he was for a democratic regime and the popular participation of the working class in the administration of society. This was not how Stalin's regime was developed. Instead his 'modernisation' was based on the brutal exploitation of the peasants and workers. In this manner an exploitative regime was developed. Consequently, international proletarian revolution was against the interests of that regime. The perspective of Marx's Communist Manifesto was against the actions and views of Stalinism. But Stalinism led to a crisis of Marxism because people considered that it was an expression of genuine Marxism. The theory of Marxism became associated with the terrible actions of Stalinism.

Aronson argues that orthodox Marxism was based on the objectivist view that the dynamics of capitalist development would promote the possibility of transition to socialism.(36) This standpoint does indicate a possible underestimation of the importance of class consciousness in the process of revolutionary change, but it could be argued that the most significant development has been changes that Marx could not possibly anticipate: “The success of reform in making life bearable within capitalism, the proliferation of countervailing tendencies beyond those named by Marx, the ever-increasing commodification of physical and psychic space that we know as consumerism, testify that capitalism has been able to meet its most vital challenges and these transformations have redefined the political and cultural space in which we live.”(37) But the primary and most important aspect of capitalism still remains after these changes which is that it is based on the exploitation of labour. Hence the Marxist argument as to why class struggle can occur within capitalism has not been and will not be discredited. Consequently it is plausible to suggest that the changes mentioned by Aronson make the generation of class struggle and the creation of a unified proletarian consciousness more difficult. However, this does not mean that Marxism is undermined by these developments, instead we need a more innovative and imaginative Marxism that is able to explain them and to incorporate the importance of a changing capitalism within the generation of strategies for change.

But the major objection to Marxism is that it became susceptible to Lenin's authoritarian interpretation which resulted in Stalinism. (38) This view is not substantiated and it ignores Marx's opposition to single party rule and that he emphasised the importance of democracy. Kautsky also provided what was a credible orthodox interpretation of the connection of democracy to Marxism. Furthermore, the original aims of the October revolution were based on the intention to uphold the importance of Soviet democracy. It was the political polarisation caused by the civil war and the unfavourable material conditions, which meant a commune state could not be established. Stalin was only able to promote his political power by means of factional struggle and he emphasised socialism in one country rather than Lenin's emphasis on international revolution. Stalinism became the regime of a new exploiting class rather than an expression of Marxism or Leninism. Formally it can be argued that Stalinism had aspects of the ideology of Marx and Lenin but its practice was a rejection of the standpoint of the proletariat or socialism. The very fact that Stalinism had rejected the approach of Marxism, and yet still attempted to uphold Marxism, meant that Marxism had entered into crisis. The major ideologues of a false Marxism meant that Marxism itself was not able to define itself in an independent manner. Instead Marxism was interpreted in terms of the opportunist premises of Stalinism or social democracy. Genuine revolutionary Marxism was lacking in influence and was considered to be anti-Soviet. There were few forces advocating proletarian revolution in a principled manner. The demise of Stalinism has not led to the advance of these genuine Marxist forces. Instead the demise of Stalinism is considered to be the end and not the renewal of Marxism. It is difficult for Marxism to undergo regeneration in this reactionary situation. The only possibility of renewal is to promote a non-dogmatic form of Marxism.

Aronson suggests that a modest form of Marxism: “It would be tentative about the proletariat's capacity to master its oppression and struggle its way to the kinds of strength and self-confidence needed to overthrow capitalism......At the same time it would insist on the necessity to pursue proletarian emancipation as the key to human liberation; it would continue to focus on the labour process and the economy as its central areas; and it would continue to stress exploitation and class struggle.”(39) Aronson suggests that Marxism would no longer be tenable without this greater sense of historical confidence. He does not explain why this 'modest' Marxism would not be possible. Indeed, we would argue that it is this sense of caution about the possibility to realise historical goals which is one of the central lessons that a non-dogmatic Marxism should learn from the history of the 20th century. Capitalism has proved to be a durable system and the ruling class is determined to maintain its hegemony. Whilst, on the other hand, the development of solidarity and unity within the working class has often proved to be a difficult task and the influence of nationalism has undermined the promotion of the strategy of international revolution. But these political difficulties do not mean that Marxism should reject its conception of emancipation and adopt a different perspective. Instead we should be aware of the difficulties involved in trying to promote a perspective of human emancipation. However, this does not mean that Marxism has to be rejected as a theory of history and society, or as a strategy of emancipation. Thus we have to be aware that serious questions are raised about orthodox and Leninist Marxism because of the resilience of capitalist society. Marxism will have to modify itself and therefore reject productive forces determinism and rigid claims of historical necessity. But the central argument in favour of Marxism is that capitalism cannot change, it cannot end exploitation and alienation, or poverty and war. It is a system that still requires its revolutionary overthrow.

Aronson suggests that the radical project of opposition to oppression could be undermined by claims of working class hegemony in the process of struggle. (40) This view is sectarian because it is capitalism and not primarily Marxism, which insists on the importance of the role of the working class for society. Consequently this social significance should be reflected in terms of its hegemonic role in the coalition of social groups that develop to oppose the aims of capital. Aronson also suggests that patriarchy and racism have to be ended by struggle against oppression, but Marxism would contend that this type of oppression can only be ended by bringing about the overthrow of capitalism. Aronson admits that capitalism still has to be overthrown by the new radical forces for change, but he denies the role of Marxism as a historical project. (41) This is a contradictory and dogmatic view, because the very continuation of capitalism indicates the crucial importance of Marxism for theoretical analysis of the system and this implies that the practical role of Marxism is not over. However, Marxism may have a more modest role within a radical coalition of progressive forces. This possibility is not ruled out and indeed it has been theorised by contemporary Marxism, as outlined above.

The reasons for Aronson's rejection of the importance of Marxism is because he has accepted Marcuse's view that a utopian society can be realised without the necessity of proletarian revolution.(42) He accepts that Marcuse's approach is not optimistic and is based on despair. His alternative is a 500 hundred year perspective of change and in relation to this long term view the possibility of hope will be upheld. Aronson does not seem to recognise that to most people the question of hope is based on their confidence in the possibility for change within their own life-times. The tensions in his position result from his failure to replace his rejection of proletarian revolution with a superior coherent alternative. He knows what he is against, but is not convincing when trying to outline what he advocates as a replacement approach. He outlines vividly the solidarity of struggle, but he does not connect these struggles with the possibility of realistic change in the short-term. The importance of a modest conception of hope that is not based on a deterministic emphasis on historical laws is required. But all he has been able to outline is the hope created by common struggle. His hope is not ontologically located in the potential for the realisation of a social alternative to capitalism. This standpoint would be dismissed by him as dogmatic. However, his emphasis on contingent change does not provide any strategic approach which outlines why change would have any relationship to existing reality. Instead he provides reasons why people would struggle against the oppression and exploitation of contemporary society, but he does not strengthen this understanding with any conception of systemic success. Thus optimism is something that we associate with Marxism. Aronson has shown that without the aim of socialism the possibility to lapse into pessimism is quite logical. He is not able to suggest that the optimism of Marxism can be sustained by the different ideologies of emancipation that will replace this project. The major reason for his pessimism is because of the lack of clarity about ultimate ends. Instead there is an important ambiguity about the very ability to understand reality. Instead the human condition is one of uncertainty: “I have been suggesting that for now it is urgent to begin where we already are, embracing being on our own without a coherent theory, a defined agency, or historical promise – and to ask what this implies.”(43)

In other words rejection of a perspective based on historical promise is to rationalise an effective conception that considers the very prospect of change to be inherently problematical. This pessimism does not provide the basis for the generation of a mass movement for emancipation. It is one thing to reject over-optimism and the dogmatic view that an alternative to capitalism is an inevitability but it also seems problematical to reduce the prospect of an alternative to being nothing more than a contingency. This approach will not motivate people to engage in struggle for improvements to society. Instead it seems that the only credible alternative to Marxism is despair. In contrast to this apparent rejection of any credible perspective of emancipation, it is possible to argue that socialism remains a principled alternative to capitalism. The world economy is based on the capital-labour relation, and this is expressed by the role of exploitation. The social character of labour has changed, but it still has an objective interest in ending capitalism and replacing it with an alternative social system which can still be defined as socialism. However, the role of the ruling ideology undermines the possibility to develop the required class consciousness that is vital in order to realise the alternative to capitalism. We know from history, and recent experience, that nationalism can be more powerful in motivating human activity than the solidarity of united class action. Nationalism has often acted to undermine the possibility of proletarian revolution on many occasions in history. Nevertheless it would be pessimistic to believe that reactionary ideologies can permanently undermine the possibility of proletarian revolution. Capitalism is increasing prone to crisis, and therefore has to continually undermine the material interests of the working class. Nationalism has no policy alternative to the necessity to develop class activity in this situation. For example, can nationalism provide credible policies when the Tory-sceptic government is forced to introduce austerity budgets in the future because the UK has left the EU? Consequently, the question becomes can Marxism become effective and able to influence the working class to struggle against capital? Can it promote the development of a mass movement for a socialist alternative? There are no simple answers to this question and it is possible that capitalism can continue to survive for a variety of reasons. This does not mean that Marxism will have proved inadequate because of its continued failure to achieve historical objectives. Instead Marxism needs to continue to modify its theory and re-equip itself to be equal to the tasks of the class struggle. Nor will the inability to realise socialism mean that it is no longer a valid alternative. Critics of socialism have not elaborated a superior alternative to capitalism.

We need to articulate what is the society that can replace capitalism, and that is socialism. This is the only type of society that envisages the development of democracy in order to solve economic problems. The popular participation of working people will ensure that scarce economic resources are utilised to realise the needs of society. Any other alternative ultimately adapts to the continuation of capitalism. The continuation of capitalism is an inadequate state of affairs for human beings because we know that socialism is possible. It would be utterly pessimistic to believe that humans are doomed to a condition of exploitation and poverty. Instead we know from brief events in history that humans can bring about alternatives to capitalism. These developments can still inspire future generations to struggle for the realisation of socialism. But Marxists have to accept that they have in the past compromised and ultimately rejected their goals because of the corruption of power. This is why struggles against capitalism have to be guided by moral values, and a rejection of the role of ambition. Instead we must be guided by the morality of solidarity and co-operation if we are to achieve our goals. This is the self-criticism that Marxism needs to accept if it is to truly learn the lessons of history. Human nature is not unchanging, but it can prove fallible and as a result compromise our aims and aspirations. We should reject power-seeking and the flaws of corruption and instead truly dedicate ourselves to the tasks of emancipation.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Gabriel Kolko after Socialism, Routledge London 2006

2) ibid p2

(3) ibid p27

(4) ibid p27

(5) Tom Rockmore: Marx after Marxism, Blackwell Oxford 2002 p152

(6) Kolko op cit p28-29

(7) Vladimir Lenin: The Position and Tasks of the Socialist International, Collected Works volume 21 Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964 p35

(8) Lenin, Karl Marx, ibid p46-91

(9) ibid p57

(10 ibid p71

(11) Kolko op c it p72

(12) Laurence Cox and Alf Gunvald, Nilsen: We Make Our Own History, Pluto Press, London, 2014

(13) ibid p5

(14) ibid p20

(15) ibid p33

(16) ibid p40

(17) ibid p53

(18) ibid p72

(19) ibid p85

(20) ibid p95

(21) ibid p176

(22) ibid p182

(23) ibid p187

(24) ibid p205

(25) ibid p206

(26) ibid p209

(27) Kolko op cit p123-127 and p150

(28) ibid p161

(29) ibid p168

(30) Ronald Aronson: After Marxism, the Guilford Press, New York 1995

(31) ibid p43

(32) ibid p67

(33) ibid p68-69

(34) ibid p70-71

(35) ibid p86

(36) ibid p97-105

(37) ibid p107

(38) ibid p111-113

(39) ibid p118

(40) ibid p187

(41) ibid p226-229

(42) ibid p268-270

(43) ibid p226