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The Russian break? Mysterious history of reception of Marx's ideas in future socialist fatherland (review essay)

CYTOWANIE

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The latest work by James D. White titled *Marx in Russia: The Fate of the Doctrine* (2019) is original in that in many places it goes across classical narratives about the development of Marxism in Russia. It contains descriptions of many key, though often bizarre, intellectual and political cases of battles over the reception of Marx's thought in prerevolutionary Russia, which influenced the fate and shape of the entire doctrine of “Marxism-Leninism” both in this country and around the world. The book shows that seemingly unimportant intellectual struggles and contradictions of that period had a great influence on the later image of revolutionary Marxism around the globe. It also contributes to the overthrow of several myths about the intellectual genesis of Marxism, which were often replicated by 20th-century western Marxist thinkers.

It should be noted that the book is not based on completely new materials and revolutionary theses, freshly prepared by the author, but is the culmination of his long-term scientific work on this subject. James D. White has been publishing scientific articles on the Russian Marxism since the 1970s, while some of the key theses discussed in the reviewed book have already been presented in more detail in three extensive monographs: *Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism* (1996), *Lenin: The Practice and Theory of Revolution* (2001), *Red Hamlet: The Life and Ideas of Alexander Bogdanov* (2018).

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The author in his works comes from the right methodological perspective, which is writing the intellectual history of Marxist thought on the basis of original sources, and not on the basis of canonical paradigms, which was a mistake of Marxism historians functioning in the scientific mainstream¹.

This book is therefore a synthetic view of James D. White's look at the intellectual history of Marxism. It allows to analyze the main advantages and disadvantages of his approach. Certainly, he is fluent with skills of a professional historian, which is connected with his knowledge of all sources in Russian, German and even Polish. The structure of the book seems to be logically justified. It begins with the history of Marx himself's relations with Russia – his relations with Russian intellectuals (Herzen, Chernyshevsky, Sieber, Zhukovsky, Kovalevsky and others) and his research on Russian economic realities. White then discusses the reception of Marx thought by leading Marxists of the turn of the century (Plekhanov, legal Marxists, Lenin, Bogdanov, Trotsky), who are well known to the wider public, ending with the Stalinist era, when the official cult of Lenin was formed and the official course of Marxism history was designed and approved on official level, and was obligatory in its general outlines until the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The content of the book ignores the interesting and relatively unknown issue of the development of Eastern Marxism in the post-Stalinist era (for example the thought of Ewald Ilyenkov, Warsaw School of History of Ideas, Budapest School, etc.), but the author was primarily interested in the genesis of the official “dialectic materialism” and “historical materialism”, the core of which has remained unchanged since Stalin's times.

The first chapters of the book deal not only with Marx's influence on Russian intellectuals, especially Sieber, who first laid the foundations for Marxism in Russia, but also, to a large extent, with their influence (mainly Chernyshevsky, Zhukovsky, Kovalevsky) on his own theoretical worldview.

White's narrative largely confirms the judgments of Hegelian Marxist thinkers like Lukács and his successors, who claimed that there is continuity between “young” and “old” Marx, which relies on Marx attachment to the Hegelian category system of Science of Logic (Siemek 2001, 226). According to White, however, this continuity did not consist in purifying the “rational core” of Hegelian philosophy from idealistic and speculative elements and developing allegedly present (according to Lukács)

¹ An example is the work of Leszek Kołakowski entitled *Main Currents of Marxism*, which, according to White, as to the origin of Marx's philosophy, is based entirely on the theses of Lukács, who in turn took his views on the subject from Plekhanov. This, however, is in itself the main source of misinterpretation of Marx's thought, which will be discussed later in this article.

materialistic motifs to the form of materialistic dialectics. The problem of Hegelian philosophy for Marx was not so much its speculative form, but the fact that, like all previous philosophies, it was Reflective, that is to say, it was, to put it simply, its own historical epoch expressed in thoughts.

Marx's merit in this context was not to create the foundations of his own philosophy – because it would be “Reflective” by definition – but to confront speculative categories of Hegel's logical (dialectical) categories with the real world, that is, the world of economics. In this way, constructing the main concepts of criticism of political economy (product, labour, money, value, etc.), he relied on Hegelian categories (the most important ones, according to White, are Universal and Particular, Nature and Society). The Capital structure was to be thus derived speculatively (as in the Science of Logic) and verified by empirical data.

A key moment of this verification process was Marx's subsequent research on primitive communities, which began around 1866, and discussions about it with Russian intellectuals. During this debate he was convinced that the categories of the Hegelian system, seemingly deductively derived, used in the construction of the Capital, also have their own empirical origins. An example was to be Russian peasant communes, which were to be the proper designator of the Universal category. As evidenced by Marx himself, Old German etymology of the word „universal” means “the community of the land”. These studies, combined with Russian researchers remarks, ultimately convinced the German philosopher that his system did not describe the universal laws of the development of capitalism, but at most described its origins in Western Europe. The practical implication of these conclusions was to suggest to Russian *Narodniki* that the fate of peasant communes is not historically determined – they can become the basis of the socialist revolution or can be absorbed by capitalism – there is not defined path. Conclusion was that in Russia it is not necessary to go through all phases of capitalism to build socialism.

All of White's above theses are well documented and difficult to reject. In fact, they are not new either – in Eastern Marxism they have been known for years (see Dobieszewski, 1988). The problem is that the author is trying to force through the concept of some kind of “epistemological cut”. According to White, Marx was supposed to break not only with Hegelian categories and rewrite Capital (which he did not manage to complete), but also to completely give up heglism and philosophy as such in favour of pure empirical research. This thesis, however, is not supported by any strong evidence, which was pointed out to the author years ago. (Sayers 1999, 2001).

The following chapters describe the genesis of the next “cut”, which caused Marx's findings have not reach the consciousness of the main generation of Russian Marxists shaping social democracy there in the

nineties of the nineteenth century. Engels, who not only infected the next generation of leading Marxist figures (Kautsky, Plekhanov) with his scientific approach, was supposed to be responsible for this state of affairs. He also did not understand the meaning of the logical structure of the *Capital* planned by Marx. As a result, after his death, Engels followed the least line of resistance, editing *Capital* and interpreting Marx's output in such a way that Marxism began to be regarded as a universal theory for the development of capitalism.

The main responsibility for this and no other image of Russian Marxism was to be borne by Plekhanov, who, based on Engels' assumptions and reading the truncated fragments of Marx's works, to whom he attributed a disproportionate role in the genesis of Marxism (18th century French materialism), created a philosophy of "dialectic materialism" – a system describing the general and universal laws of reality development. His interpretation was to be universally accepted in Russia and, after the revolution was won, also in the world. This is also a well-known fact, but White also attributes to Plekhanov a distortion of the intellectual legacy of the first Russian Marxists and the *Narodniki* movement. He did this through his polemics with his competitors from the *Narodniki* movement at the end of the 19th century. White proves that the programmatic differences between Plekhanov's party and his native competitors were in fact small, while the future "father of Russian Marxism" attacked them with politically and personally motivated pamphlets in which he distorted the views of all the revolutionary intellectuals preceding him and attributed Slavophilia to them. The aim was to secure Plekhanov's personal benefit by creating himself as the most important Marxist in the country, with the result that the arguments of the previous generation about the possibility of a particular Russian path to socialism were concealed.

The most important, in my opinion, part of the book is the intellectual story of Lenin and Bogdanov, whose thought and attitude towards Plekhanov's philosophy, in White's view, are two powerful antitheses in the formation of Marxism in Russia, which found their unexpected synthesis in the Stalinist ideology.

In the author's narrative from these two, Bogdanov was the truly original thinker who played a decisive role in the development of the key concepts of Russian Marxism. On a political level, he was the right creator of the concept of "democratic centralism". His philosophical views were far from the idealism that Lenin and Plekhanov had accused him of. Based on the ideas of Mach and Avenarius, he created his own philosophical system – *Tectology*, which was to be the general science of the principles of organization of all living and inanimate forms. In this sense, Bogdanov, contrary to Engels and Plekhanov, was to carry out a more nuanced and complex criticism of Hegelian dialectics, to finally overcome it in the spirit of Marx (2018, 460).

Tectology had to overcome the limitations of Hegelian dialectics by recognising the processual nature of a reality whose organisation and dynamics were based on two poles – activity and resistance. The whole world was divided into “elements” of activity and resistance of various types, creating “complexes”. (human body, society, stellar systems, etc.), which were the point of equilibrium between them. From here he derived the law “of the least”. This is nothing more than a theoretical foundation for the famous concept of “the weakest link”. The structural stability of the whole was to be dependent on its weakest link. Exceeding a certain weight was to lead to the breakage of the whole chain in this link. So, it was Bogdanov who was supposed to provide the best justification for the Russian revolution, which was used in Bukharin’s works, and finally attributed to Lenin, who was in fact skeptical about concept of „the weakest link”. *Tectology* through Bucharin also inspired the first post-revolutionary courses of Marxism, such as *ABC of Communism*. Moreover, the concept of Bogdanov’s equilibrium through the influence of Bukharin was supposed to be behind the economic policy of the USSR in the 1920s, leading to the economic reconstruction of the country.

Bogdanov was supposed to combine inspiring theoretical concepts with political advantages. He was to oppose the authoritarianism of the Bolsheviks, the willingness to solve conflicts by means of violence. Instead, he proposed his well known concepts of socialist culture and organisation. In addition, in 1917 he accurately criticized war communism, arguing that it did not introduce a new socialist organization, but only created a system of consumption of the remains of the fallen capitalist system.

What strikes White’s book the most is the dissonance between the above, the nuanced and insightful representation of Bogdanov’s thoughts and the presentation of Lenin’s character. The Bolshevik leader was presented as an authoritarian, blind follower of Marxism in the Plekhanov version, a revolutionary Jacobin, actually a Blanquist, whose entire activity was basically limited to fighting for power in the party and voluntary attempts to carry out a revolution in order to rule with a handful of his party companion. Lenin appears to be a mediocre economist – he wrongly assumes that capitalism was established in Russia, he approaches Hilferding’s theory of financial capital uncritically, which resulted in a mistaken belief that the nationalisation of banks would be enough to break the resistance of capital after the revolution. Lenin turns out to be also a highly overestimated philosopher – *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* is an eristic pamphlet in defence of Plekhanov’s philosophy, while *Philosophical Notebooks* was not a spontaneous intellectual reaction to the outbreak of war and the crash of the Second International, because the main records and theses arose in 1913, when Lenin studied the correspondence of Marx and Engels – mainly because he was seeking for better arguments against Bogdanov’s philosophy.

While Lenin, unlike Stalin, is not a typical tyrant and dictator for White, he is an authoritarian, intellectually limited man who has laid the foundations of Stalinism with his works and activities. For him, Lenin is primarily Lenin from *What is to be Done?*. He was to make the main “cut” between Marx’s thought and Russian Marxism through his alleged statement that the revolution should be led by the party elite. What is more, Lenin was to distance himself decisively from Marx and Engels, allowing the revolution to take place through violence and terror. Most of White’s narratives have nothing to do with social reality, but more to do with alleged Lenin’s authoritarian personality.

In this respect, White’s work fails the most. It is not that he criticizes Lenin by valuing Bogdanov – in the light of the facts presented, it may indeed be that the latter was a much more interesting thinker. It’s about how he does it. The history of Marxism and the revolution in Russia in the author’s narrative seems to have no deeper connection with the real historical processes taking place there. Class struggle, social and economic crises – all this seems to have little significance in the intellectual choices of prominent Marxists. Both the Marxism theory and the outbreak of the revolution in Russia are determined by a combination of extremely random events and psychologically determined decisions of the main actors. The assessment of the Trotsky character is striking in this context. For White, he was the most brilliant Russian Marxist next to Bogdanov. However, he was a much better theoretician in his first articles on the permanent revolution (1904), where he criticized the general Bolshevik strategy of revolution by warning against taking power by small minority, than in his post-revolution works such as *Revolution Betrayed*, where he nuanced the qualitative differences between Leninism and Stalinism by emphasizing the emancipatory dimension of the first trend. According to the author, there can be no other explanation for this change in Trotsky’s views than a psychological explanation – because Trotsky gained fame and power after the revolution and defended Leninism in order to legitimize his own achievements and position.

White is well aware of the existence of works that placed the thought of the Bolshevik in a broader historical context, overthrowing the myths of Lenin’s “totalitarian” inclinations (2009). For White (2001, 198), this type of work is called “Lenin from a Leninist point of view”, and thus “concentrating on what Lenin thought rather than what Lenin did”. Therefore, for example, we will not learn anything about Lenin’s impressions connected with the 1905 revolution and his belief in the spontaneity of the mass revolutionary movement (Harding 2009, 290). This is important because ignoring Marxist historiography as “non-objective”, the author not only allows for simplifications, but also loses the opportunity to discuss and nuance his theses.

For White there is no significant difference between Lenin from 1902 and Lenin from 1917. Bogdanov is, however, a constantly evolving in-

tellectual who is deliberately destroyed politically by Lenin, who just wanted to rule. However, the newest interpretations of Marxist historians shed a completely different light on this matter. John Marot for example argued that Bogdanov with his group of intellectuals wanted to be an revolutionary elite, which would pass the knowledge to the proletariat about culture and organization. However, the 1905 revolution showed that the proletariat did not need any external teachers to gain revolutionary awareness and overthrow capitalism. Bogdanov, however, believed that even the leaders of the working class had authoritarian tendencies that had to be eliminated by culture. And this stance, and not the issue suggested by most historians (including White) Bogdanov's group's opposition to the Bolsheviks' participation in the Duma elections, was supposed to be the source of conflict between the creator of *Tectology* and Lenin (Marot 2011, 189–200).

White, however, is not at all interested in the possibility of the Russian working class influencing the views of Russian Marxists. In his interpretation, Lenin, building “war communism” and “proletarian dictatorship”, made serious mistakes and distorted Marx's ideas. It seems that this was not influenced by any external circumstances, but mainly by what works he read and how little he understood from. Bogdanov's vision of proletarian culture in the context of White's book seems to be much more realistic, but question how to build a “proletarian culture” in concere terms in these turbulent times was not answered. This is one of many questions that we will not find an answer to.

To sum up, Marx in Russia leaves an ambiguous impression. On the one hand, it is a great historical work that brings the English-speaking reader closer to many sources and facts known mainly from Russian, German or Polish literature. The author nuances the thought of Marx himself, as well as a few forgotten or mythologized by Stalinist historiography Russian Marxists, with Bogdanov at the forefront, with insight and a great deal of reliability. The book restores their rightful place in the line and encourages further research. It is shocking, however, that at the same time White reproduces a rather typical, anti-communist narrative about Lenin and the Bolshevik movement. It was as if, exposing Stalin's falsifications in relation to one another, he applied them in relation to the other. It seems that White, while retaining his sympathy for Marx, went on a deep defensive at the same time, protecting him at all costs from associations with Bolshevism and the USSR, starting from the assumption typical for a Western researcher, that this necessarily means relations with the „Great Evil”. Meanwhile, it is a construction based on unstable foundations – although most of the book talks about the nuances of successive Marxist theories, the thesis about the “cut” between Marx and the Bolsheviks is based not on alleged misinterpretations by Engels, Plekhanov, etc., but on an age-old cliché about the

dictatorship of the proletariat as a dictatorship of party elites. Apart from these not very successful conclusions, White's book should be a fascinating reading for every historian of Marxist philosophy because of its rich factual material.

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