

Bachelor's Thesis

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An Investigation of Marxism's Responsibility for
Authoritarianism in the Soviet Union

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Summary:

This thesis is a written critique of David. W. Lovell's *From Marx to Lenin: An Evaluation of Marx's Responsibility for Soviet Authoritarianism*. It summarizes Lovell's arguments and conclusions and criticizes them for leaving out some of Marx's most notable critics and their views. I seek to demonstrate how Lovell's work is an example of a wrong approach to philosophical responsibility, both because it seeks to link outcomes to a man instead of to ideas, and because it does not engage with these ideas sufficiently. I will conclude that Lovell's mistakes are an example of the causes behind Marxism's continued popularity, and object to an a-moral analysis of philosophical theory.

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Despite claiming around a 100 million lives according to major estimations¹, communism's chief intellectual, Karl Marx, remains widely taught and well respected. A 2006 national survey revealed that 3% of all professors and almost 18% of those in the social sciences in American Universities considered themselves Marxist².

However, most of them would probably not identify themselves with communist regimes. While many communist leaders, like modern intellectuals and academics, identify themselves as Marxist, Marxist regimes are often painted as a poor implementations of Marx's ideas. This thesis seeks to explore whether it is justifiable to separate Marx's ideas and their supposed implementation by authoritarian regimes. By examining a work by David Lovell, who seeks to explore the ideas of Marx and their implementation by Lenin, this thesis seeks to contribute to the debate over the link between Marxist theory and authoritarian outcomes.

Lovell's work, '*an Evaluation of Marx's Responsibility for Soviet Authoritarianism.*', is as far as I'm aware the only full-length academic book aimed at Marx's responsibility for the humanitarian crisis that was the Soviet regime. I will critique Lovell's work by showcasing both his failure to come up with a satisfactory question and line of argument, as well as his failure to address central elements of Marxist ideology. I will argue that his mistakes could be indicative of the causes behind Marxism's enduring popularity.

Roughly, this thesis will be divided into three parts:

First, I will briefly summarize Lovell's study. I will introduce his main question, how he places it within a broader academic context, and sum up his conclusion.

This part of the thesis aims to both inform the reader of Lovell's arguments and standpoint as well as explain both the scope of Lovell's work and of this work, defining the primary elements of his methodology and introduce his greatest shortcomings. Specifically, it will introduce and explain his choice to define responsibility as a logical relationship between Marx's 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and Lenin's design of the Soviet state, and to define Soviet Authoritarianism as a suppression of opposition and liberal democracy.

The second part seeks to highlight the inadequacies of Lovell's terms for the debate, by demonstrating how they are too narrow and based on a lack of ideological diversity in his source materials.

¹ Courtois et al (1999). *The Black Book of Communism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.,

² Gross, Neil; Simmons, Solon (2007). *The Social and Political Views of American Professors*

My aim in this section is not to give an in-depth analysis of Marx's writing, but merely to establish that it is not unreasonable to state that Lovell's approach to responsibility is inadequate, and that even within this limited approach there is more room to investigate the relationship between Marx's work and Soviet authoritarianism.

In the third section, I will sum up my arguments and place them within a broader context: how does Lovell's book exemplify Marxism's unique treatment as an accepted academic position?

Explaining Lovell's study

Marx and the Soviet Union form an interesting case study for those investigating philosophers and the outcomes of their ideas, because there is perhaps no better example of an ideological link between a tyrannical state and a set of ideas. Lovell is aware of the odd relation between Marx and the outcomes of his project, as he starts his book by noting that Hegel is often denounced as an authoritarian philosopher while Marx is lauded as a philosopher of freedom, even though Hegel's ideas and policies were never really implemented by fascists while Marx's ideas are embraced by authoritarian states³. He goes on to say that he is not going to analyze "the ironies of history", but that he rather wishes to introduce the "general issue of which this study treats a particular instance":

That issue is the relationship between political and social theorists and the states and policies inspired by or attributed to them. What, in other words, constitutes historical continuity and legitimate application of political and social projects. This book examines whether Soviet authoritarianism was a necessary or inevitable consequence of Lenin's attempt to fulfil what he understood as Marx's project by tracing the concept of the transition to socialism through the Marxist tradition, from Marx to Lenin.⁴

Lovell goes on to declare that any philosophers who create or design a project put themselves in an awkward position, because they have very little control over what happens to their work⁵. Marx is an especially difficult case, according to Lovell, because he wasn't widely understood amongst his followers⁶. Nevertheless, Lovell poses that the question is if "despite this, he was essentially understood. If Lenin essentially understood Marx's project, and if that understanding was faithfully embodied in the structure and policies of the Soviet state, then Marx must be held accountable for Soviet authoritarianism"⁷. Thus, from the very beginning, Lovell restricts the scope of his research to the

³ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p .9

⁴ ^Ibid.

⁵ ^Idem. p. 10

⁶ ^Idem. p. 9

⁷ ^Idem p.10

question if the Soviet state (as devised by Lenin) was the result of a legitimate application of Marx's project. Lovell recognizes that there is no use in asking if Lenin was a Marxist as there is not one clear scholarly definition of Marxism and there are wide and varying interpretations of what Marxism is⁸. He claims it is, however, a valid exercise to question the relationship between Marx's project (his work pertaining the achievement of a socialist society) and the Soviet State, both because there were Marxist alternatives during the same time period and because there is some evidence to be found that Lenin's interpretation of Marx is not legitimate⁹. Lovell notes that the relationship between Lenin and Marx is again too complex to fully analyze, so he will only focus on one element: Marx's writings on the transition to socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and Lenin's implementation of this transition. Lovell explains his reasoning for this focus as follows:

I believe that since one of the central objectives of Marx's project is freedom, since the most important defect of the early Soviet state was its lack of freedom, and since the most important fear inspired by Marx's project is the denial of freedom, the Marxist conception of the transition to socialism – the Marxist' immediate political objective – must be the prime subject of investigation to determine whether authoritarianism is a necessary part of any attempt to fulfil Marx's project.¹⁰

This seems a completely reasonable argument, and one that keeps Lovell's work relevant even though it was written 34 years ago. Since the contrast between Marx's ideals and the results of those who seem to want to realize his goals is so enormous, it is reasonable to examine whether this is to be blamed on Marx himself or on those who seek to realize his project. The way to establish if there is 'historical continuity' and a 'legitimate application' of Marx within Soviet authoritarianism, Lovell argues, is to show that there is a causal, or 'logical and necessary' connection between Marx and Lenin, and between Lenin and the Soviet state¹¹.

Lovell builds his case by providing a history of the ideas of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and the transition to socialism as well as a historiography of writings regarding these subjects. He shows both Marx and his followers as well as those who criticize and contextualize their ideas.

Lovell argues that Lenin was influenced not just by Marx, but also by the Russian revolutionary tradition and its mediation with Marx through Plekhanov. Lovell thus concludes that since most of Lenin's justifications for his authoritarianism lay in areas where he was innovative within the Marxist tradition,

⁸ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 14

⁹ ^Idem p. 15

¹⁰ ^Idem. p.13

¹¹ ^Idem. p. 9

and because those were areas where Marx himself was vague, Marx cannot be blamed for Soviet authoritarianism¹².

Causal, Logical and Necessary

To make sense of this argument, we first of all need to make sense of Lovell's use of causal, logical and necessary. Lovell does not explain these terms on their own, so it is up to the reader to find out exactly what he means with them. By sometimes using causal and sometimes 'Logical and necessary' in similar contexts, Lovell seems to suggest that he means them to be the same thing. There is no point in arguing whether he is correct to use these terms without first establishing what they mean in the context of his work. If causal can be used interchangeably with 'logical and necessary', then it seems wise to investigate what he means by the latter two of these terms, as they together seem to constitute the kind of causal connection Lovell would require for Marx to be held accountable for soviet authoritarianism.

A close reading of the structure of arguments in the book reveals much about what Lovell exactly means. Lovell primarily argues in the conclusion of his chapters, all of which are brief overviews of influential Marxist thinkers and Marxist debates regarding the transitional phase to socialism and the dictatorship of the proletariat. In the conclusion, he writes that "If elements of Marx's work had an authoritarian flavor, they were leavened by others that did not: this is no less true of the transition period.¹³" and that "Lenin defended the Soviet state as an example of Marx's 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat', challenging the Marxist credentials of other Marxists for whom the very concept of 'dictatorship' was an embarrassment"¹⁴. These quotes serve well to sum up two of Lovell's central arguments: Marx himself was ambiguous, unclear and contradictory, so his crime is one of 'omission, not commission'¹⁵, and Lenin's reading of Marx is radically different from other Marxists who did not arrive to the same conclusions. If these are the two main arguments for Marx's innocence, Lenin's deviation from Marx and Marxist tradition as well as Marx's ambiguity are the elements that make Marx's connection to soviet Authoritarianism not logical and not necessary.

It is especially where those two main arguments collide that we can get a glimpse of what exactly Lovell means when he speaks of necessity and logic.

By thoroughly examining both Marx's more liberal and democratic views as well as those of other Marxists and pushing them to the foreground, Lovell seems to try and present the alternatives to Lenin's

¹² Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 195-196

¹³ ^Idem. p. 193

¹⁴ ^Idem. p. 197

¹⁵ ^Ibid.

take on a transition to socialism as proof of Marx's inculpability. It is thus not much of a stretch to take him to mean as much as 'without possible alternatives' when he speaks of necessary as a condition.

Likewise, 'logical' seems to refer to his statement that "If Lenin essentially understood Marx's project, and if that understanding was faithfully embodied in the structure and policies of the Soviet state, then Marx must be held accountable for Soviet authoritarianism"¹⁶.

The causal link Lovell requires for Marx to be responsible for Soviet authoritarianism is thus logical in the sense that Lenin would have to correctly understand and implement Marx, and necessary in the sense that Leninist oppression would have to be the only possible outcome of a state based on Marxism.

Is this a fair way to establish responsibility? Lovell clarifies that he is not investigating a moral responsibility in any sense¹⁷. He believes Marx's disciples were independent moral agents, whose actions Marx cannot be held accountable for. His concept of responsibility is, like the link that can establish it, simply causal in nature.

Who is fit to judge Marx?

While the discussed sources are wide and varied, from Marx and Engels to their anarchist critics and Social Democrat allies, Lovell does exclude one group of thinkers from his study. Lovell specifies this group and defends their exclusion early on, in his introduction:

It is a group whose members seek formulae, or underlying causes, for what they believe to be the inevitable translation of Marx's thought into Soviet authoritarianism...this study, in contrast with theirs, is based on the belief that only a systematic pursuit of concrete and historical links can yield the foundation for a judicious assessment of their relationship.¹⁸

It is important to examine why Lovell believes this group to be in the wrong and rejects their claims outright, because I believe that his arguments for excluding this group are fairly weak and undermine much of his later conclusions. This group and their ideas, both of which are referenced to by Lovell simply as 'the formulae', are wide and varied, from Lord Acton to Popper and Kolakowski to Talmon. If Lovell were to simply offer 'a systematic pursuit of concrete and historical links'¹⁹, foregoing a more philosophical examination of some underlying problems of a Marxist project, that would be well within his right. It would be perfectly legitimate to exclude the formulae thinkers on the grounds that it is a

¹⁶ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.10

¹⁷ ^Idem. p.15

¹⁸ ^Ibid.

¹⁹ ^Ibid.

different investigation entirely. However, Lovell goes on to show “why the formulae are no substitute”²⁰, and quickly seeks to argue why their investigation is not legitimate. By pitting the formulaic methods against his own, describing them as an inadequate substitute and trying to refute them, Lovell invites us to examine his arguments for doing so more closely.

Lovell examines Kolakowski and Acton, who claim that there is a tension between freedom and unity in Marx’s theory²¹. He also discusses Talmon, who says that Marx his theory is predicated on a too perfectionist concept of man, and Popper, who claims that there is no scientific method to come to ideal ends, turning Marx’s project into a violent struggle between competing Utopias²².

Lovell sees two central arguments in the formulaic critics of Marx. The first being that Marx’s theory is based on competing values and therefor necessitates somewhat of a Leninist interpretation (skewing to authoritarianism in wherever Marx was unclear) and the second that Marx’s project is Utopian and that ‘a preoccupation with ideal ends is necessarily linked with a thorough indifference to even the basest means.’²³

Before we assess whether it is fair of Lovell to sum up his critics with these two arguments, we will first examine how he seeks to repudiate them. First, Lovell focuses on the latter argument, that Marx’s utopianism forces an ends above means approach. Lovell seeks to do this both by showing how there is no direct link between utopianism and authoritarianism and by showing Marx’s project is not uniquely utopian.

He starts by noting that the relationship between utopianism and totalitarianism is not necessary, because not all utopians are merely focused on ends. Marx clearly was not, according to Lovell. To prove this, he cites Marx: “An end which requires an unjustified means is no justifiable end”²⁴. People who criticize Marx’s utopianism overlook the fact that many idealistic people do not revert to the worst of means, according to Lovell²⁵. He cites the ideal of the perfectibility of man as being present in the liberal tradition as well, while no one criticizes liberalism for being authoritarian. Leninism and the Soviet state were end-based not because all utopian theory is, but because he wanted to force history and had to take control of a backward society²⁶.

²⁰ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx’s responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.10

²¹ ^Ibid.

²² ^Idem. P.16

²³ ^Ibid.

²⁴ ^Idem P.17

²⁵ ^Idem. P.18

²⁶ ^Ibid.

This argument doesn't seem to be very convincing. First, it isn't entirely clear what constitutes 'unjustifiable means' for Marx. While Lovell does rotate back to a more in depth look at Marx's conception of a transition to socialism, he never expands on what Marx would consider 'justified'. Lovell claims it would be counter-productive and impossible to ask what Marx would've thought of Lenin, but by using this quote he begs the question. The quote from Marx seems to leave a lot of leeway when it comes to acceptable means to achieve an end. It might make clear that Marx does not believe that ends do not justify any means, but this does not necessarily mean that all inquiries into what means become acceptable under the guise of a socialist ends are invalid, nor does it do anything to address the main argument that *underlying* elements of Marxist theory promote an ends over means attitude.

Secondly, his argument that liberalism does not get accused of promoting ends over means despite also incorporating utopian notions (the perfectibility of man) does nothing to protect Marxism from such criticisms. Simply because another broad political philosophy also has some utopian notions that do not get criticized as much as Marxism, does not by itself absolve Marx's project from such criticisms. One of the reasons liberalism does not get criticized as much as Marxism does for promoting an ends over means attitude, is because there might be elements in liberalism that go against it, and there are no clear examples of liberal authoritarian regimes. Lovell is not unaware of those elements, because he criticizes Popper's defense of a Kantian view (that people should never be treated as a means but always as an end) in the same paragraphs on the grounds that "we continually... make ourselves a means to an end both individually and socially. We sacrifice our health for wealth and status... whether or not we ought to, we all at some point see ourselves or others as a means to an end without falling victim to authoritarianism"²⁷. This seems a very underdeveloped argument at best and a fallacious one at worst: simply because we tend to see people as means rather than ends does not mean we should. Lovell seems to criticize Popper (who considers Marxism to be a means above ends philosophy) on two points: first of all for holding ideals that are also unrealistic (and therefore utopian in a sense) because we see people as an ends all the time, while also using his rebuttal as an example demonstrating that seeing people as a means does not necessarily lead to authoritarianism and oppression²⁸.

While seemingly random, it is important to mention these arguments, as I believe them to be indicative of a general tendency in Lovell's work. He tries to engage with the entire academic debate around Marx and authoritarianism but is very selective in how much time and attention he dedicates to various strains of authors, without proper justification. Lovell might be right in his assumption that not all utopian ideas

²⁷ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p.18

²⁸ ^Ibid.

necessarily lead to authoritarian regimes, but this alone does not serve as a justification for shutting out those who consider fundamental flaws in Marxist theory to be the cause of authoritarianism in socialist regimes.

Lovell feels it is Marxists who we should turn to for an analysis of Soviet authoritarianism. In his introduction, he writes, “some of the major critics of Marx and Lenin were themselves socialists or Marxists. It is to these critics we must turn for an appreciation of the dangers of Marx’s project.” Without offering further legitimization for doing so, he thus restricts his research into Marx’s tendency to create authoritarian regimes to Marxist authors and the Marxist sphere of thinking. This seems unacceptable, and judging from the lazy justification for doing so, suggests a disregard for non-Marxist views on the matter altogether.

Three questions arise from this. The first is if Lovell’s methodology is in any way an excuse for the exclusion of non-Marxist texts from the investigation of ‘guilt’ (in the causal sense), and secondly if we find this methodology itself satisfactory. Finally, we can ask whether it is desirable to restrict Marx’s possible responsibility only to this causal level, devoid of any moral content. I will now delve deeper into each question.

Why exclude non-Marxists from the debate?

Several arguments could be made for the exclusion of those outside of the discipline of Marxism from this standpoint. The first and most obvious argument one could offer is that if Marx’s responsibility is causal in nature and this causality consists of necessity and logic as defined above, critics outside of the Marxist tradition cannot add to the debate because they insufficiently understand Marx’s writings and the Marxist tradition. If Marx’s responsibility is predicated on whether he was properly understood by Lenin, one could say the Marxist community is obviously much better equipped to establish if this was the case. Likewise, if authoritarianism has to be a necessary, and thus exclusive, outcome of Marx’s project for Marx to be culpable, the Marxist tradition has to be studied extensively, because that is where the alternatives exist. Lovell never makes this argument explicit, but it shines through in his selection of discussed works.

However, whether someone is a Marxist is not based on his understanding of Marx, but whether he agrees with some central tenets. To say that only Marxists truly understand Marx, would be to say that only those who agree with at least some central parts of Marx’s theory are capable of understanding them. Or, in other words, this argument makes the claim that everyone who truly understands Marx would agree with him in at least some degree. Lovell successfully shows how there is a rich democratic tradition (in

the liberal sense) amongst Marx's followers as an alternative to Leninism²⁹, but the point of fundamental critics is not that Marx isn't open to various interpretations, but that its central elements cause authoritarian regimes in *practice*.

When Lovell wrote his work in 1987, the horrors of not only the Soviet Union, but also of Maoist China and the Khmer Rouge had all been widely known. While partly to be excused by the fact that Lovell's work is a case study of specifically the authoritarian elements of the Soviet Union, it nevertheless seems disingenuous to ignore one of the most obvious facts of the 20th century thus far: that authoritarianism and human rights violations happen in every supposedly Marxist state conceived. For critics of the fundamental elements of Marxism, the question of whether the totalitarian state created by Lenin was in any way representative of Marx's work is part of the broader question whether Marx's theory in general leads to authoritarianism.

The omission of such insights becomes most obvious in Lovell's attempt to brush Kolakowski aside. Kolakowski (a former Marxist who has written various books criticizing Marxism later in his life) according to Lovell, makes the claim that Marx's project is utopian because it is based on competing values of freedom and social unity³⁰. Since social unity can only be achieved by despotism, Lenin's actions were a logical outcome of Marx's theory. Lovell rejects this criticism by stating that despotism is in conflict with freedom for Marx because Marx's project is based upon a resolving of all conflict in society, while despotism is the maximalization of conflict³¹. While the point can certainly be made that Marx's notion of freedom is incompatible with the idea of despotism as freedom in theory, this is completely beside the point. Kolakowski is not arguing that Marx himself intended or envisioned an authoritarian outcome, he is simply stating that the Marxist doctrine leads to and inspires authoritarian states:

It would be silly to say, of course, that this was the prophet's intention or that Marxism produced twentieth-century communism as its efficient cause. The victory of Russian communism resulted from a series of extraordinary accidents. But it might be said that Marx's theory contributed strongly to the emergence of totalitarianism, and that it provided its ideological form.³²

Lovell seems to say that these authoritarian states cannot possibly be Marxist, because they are built upon despotism, and Marx was against despotism. But no one is claiming these states are Marxist in the sense

²⁹ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press P. 90-118

³⁰ ^Idem. P.15 - 16

³¹ ^Idem. P.19

³² Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p.2

that they would get Marx's approval. They are Marxist in the sense that it are Marx's central tenets that underpin their authoritarianism. This showcases an inability to see Marxist theory from outside of Marx's perspective. As Kolakowski notes:

What Marxism is the least capable of explaining is the totalitarian socialism that appointed Marx as its prophet. Many Western Marxists used to repeat that socialism such as it existed in the Soviet Union had nothing to do with Marxist theory and that, deplorable as it might be, it was best explained by some specific conditions in Russia. If this is the case, how could it have happened that so many people in the nineteenth century, especially the anarchists, predicted fairly exactly what socialism based on Marxist principles would turn out to be—namely, state slavery? These predictions were made in the nineteenth century, decades before the Russian Revolution. Were these people clairvoyant? No. Rather, one could make such predictions rationally, and infer from Marxian anticipations the system of socialized serfdom.³³

While there is absolutely no evidence that Lovell would consider himself a Marxist, he seems at least unable or unwilling to grasp Kolakowski's argument: that many of Marx's critics successfully predicted the outcomes of his project, but that Marxist theory itself cannot explain why. This attitude, to leave the analysis of Marxism solely to Marxists, could explain how its hands have remained relatively clean, and how Marxism has stayed an acceptable academic position despite its grim outcomes. If we take Marx on his word, socialism would bring about absolute freedom, and save us from a deep alienation of ourselves by bringing together particularity and universality with the disappearance of class and politics (in the form of a constant power struggle).

Lovell takes ample time to explain this coming together of the universal and particular: a classless society is not universal in the sense that the particular disappears or the persons in it have no room for individuation, it is universal in the sense that its classless character allows us to be in harmony³⁴. Lovell even goes as far as to say that Marx believed that in this classless society, freedom of opposition would not be required because without class there would be no opposition. It is only during the transition that Marx's theories are problematic according to Lovell, because during the transitional phase there are still classes, and thus opposition.³⁵ Lovell suggests that since Marx believed that a classless society would not have any struggle and because he was unclear about how that would come to be, Marx cannot be tied to authoritarian character of the Soviet state. But Marx's beliefs are no insulation from the inherent dangers of such a theory. Lovell does not get back to the 'ends before means' argument, but Marx's

³³ Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p.1

³⁴ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press p. 68

³⁵ [^]Ibid.

ambiguity about freedom of opposition during the transitional phase and promise of freedom afterwards should clearly invite an ends and means discussion.

Kolakowski does not object to freedom and unity being beautiful goals, he objects to the idea that they can be brought together without unity becoming the means to freedom as an end, thus justifying mandatory brotherhood in the form of state slavery with a promise of ultimate freedom in the end³⁶. How Lovell's methodology justifies leaving such insights out is not at all clear, but it is fairly apparent how it excludes them. Lovell's idea of an investigation of causal responsibility fails in a predictable way: by taking the political in Marx's theory as a separate entity only to be understood from a Marxist perspective and by narrowing down the terms.

Methodological mistakes

One way in which Lovell sidesteps the issue of state-slavery as an outcome of Marxism, is by using a fairly narrow definition of authoritarianism. He defines this simply as a lack of liberal democracy³⁷. He has some good reasons for doing so: democracy itself is an ambivalent term, and he takes great measures to explain how Lenin used that term to his advantage. Democracy is whatever the majority wants, and Lenin claims to know what is best for the majority better than the majority itself, therefore, his authoritarian rule is democratic³⁸. Because of this, Lovell uses the contrast of liberal democracy, with liberal simply denoting the room for criticism and opposition. Lenin is not a liberal democrat, Lovell argues, because he does not allow opposition³⁹.

This seems a fair way to restrict the debate, because it allows Lovell to explore whether Marx's theory leaves room for opposition in the transition to socialism. However, authoritarianism within the Soviet Union is in our common perception a much broader concept. Of course, the lack of freedom to vote and be critical, or at least to have that vote or criticism have any meaning is authoritarian, but by focusing purely on political freedom Lovell does not have to engage with one of Marx's fundamental critics strongest points: that economic freedom is a prerequisite for freedom in general⁴⁰. There might be great variety in Marxist thought about democracy, free speech and the right to opposition, but the central

³⁶ Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p. 3

³⁷ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P.20-21

³⁸ ^Idem. P. 170-176

³⁹ ^Idem. P.20-21

⁴⁰ Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p. 2, Tucker, B. R. (1972). *State socialism and anarchism*, Colorado, R. Myles., Mises (2007). *Human Action: a treatise on economics*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund. P 283

element of socialism is the lack of private property⁴¹, and thus the transition to socialism primarily consists of the seizing and distribution of the means of production. Revisionists and other strains of Marxists that oppose Marxism-Leninism might distance themselves from Lenin but surely, they would not distance themselves from the idea that common ownership (or complete lack of ownership) are required for the transition to and the implementation of socialism. It is exactly this economic requirement which is primarily the cause of Soviet authoritarianism in the broader sense. As Kolakowski puts it:

Marx took the slogan that in the future there would be no government, only the administration of things; it did not occur to him, however, that one cannot administer things without employing people for that purpose, so the total administration of things means the total administration of people.⁴²

Is it at any rate feasible to look only at the political character of a state and Marxist political theory to establish a causal link between its authoritarian character and ideological underpinnings, while omitting its economic form and the theoretical basis for it?

For Marx, they certainly were not separate. For Marx, the state was the peak of man's political alienation from himself and thus the transition to socialism had as one of its goals to break down the barrier between the state and society itself⁴³. The state becoming a tool for redistribution and a way of the revolution to defend itself while simultaneously becoming closer to society is one of the conflicting elements of Marx's work Lovell identifies himself, yet he treats it simply as Marx being ambiguous and unclear⁴⁴, not as severe negligence and an example of Kolakowski's point that it has conflicting values that lead to authoritarianism.

There is another problem with Lovell's assessment of what exactly constitutes Soviet Authoritarianism. Citing Marx's shock at the oppression of the 1848 uprisings by the bourgeoisie, Marx naturally felt the revolution should be able to defend itself, argues Lovell, and we cannot hold this against him⁴⁵. Lovell accepts that any revolution should at least be able to defend itself during the revolutionary phase, otherwise there cannot be spoken of a revolution⁴⁶. Lenin's trick, and what makes his 'defense of the revolution' unfit for Marxist theory, Lovell argues, was that he gave methodology, tactics and ideas a

⁴¹ Marx, Karl (2008). *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Nove, Alec. (2008). *New Palgrave Dictionary of Economics*, N. Scott Arnold. (2008). *The Philosophy and Economics of Market Socialism: A Critical Study*. Oxford University Press, p. 8

⁴² Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p. 2,

⁴³ P. Thomas, *Karl Marx and the Anarchists* (1980). Routledge and Kegan Paul, London p. 101-102, Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 68-69

⁴⁴ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 68-69

⁴⁵ ^Idem. P. 36-37

⁴⁶ ^Idem.. P. 68-69

class character⁴⁷. For Lenin, whoever was with him was proletariat, and whoever was against him was bourgeoisie. This was uniquely Lenin, and a great innovation in Marxist theory, and thus original to Lenin and a defilement of Marx's work⁴⁸. What Lovell holds against Lenin then, seems to be primarily that he oppressed and attacked other socialists and those who were part of the proletariat in the economic (and thus Marxist) sense of the word. If it is the oppression of what is the actual proletariat (in the economic and Marxist sense) by Lenin that makes his interpretation of Marx's work implausible, and if this is what makes the Soviet state authoritarian in an un-Marxist way, does this automatically mean that all Soviet authoritarianism is unrelated to Marx's theory?

The political character of Lovell's analysis restricts his research mostly to the oppression of fellow socialists in Lenin's party. Lovell is right to note that the oppression of the Mensheviks and other 'left-socialists' is in conflict with Marx's conception of a dictatorship of the proletariat. Marx, however unclear he was, at least meant this to be the raising to power of an entire economic class⁴⁹. Lenin's justification for oppressing other socialists: that only those who agree with him are the real proletarians, doesn't fit within Marx's concept of class, because it is economic condition and not political opinion which delineates the position of individuals in this struggle⁵⁰.

But Lenin did not only suppress other socialists, and Soviet authoritarianism consisted of much more than a lack of freedom within the communist party of Russia. When Bertrand Russell, himself a socialist, met Lenin, he was shocked to hear Lenin boast of his agrarian land reforms:

One question I posed him was that he was trying to institute socialism, but if I looked at the country side he seemed to set up peasant proprietorship, which is quite different from agricultural socialism. And Lenin said "no, we didn't set up proprietorship. You see there are poor peasants and rich peasants, and we stirred up the poor peasants against the rich peasants, and soon they hanged them from the highest tree."⁵¹

Russell was deeply disturbed by this seemingly cruel act, using jealousy to inspire murder. Lovell could argue that this is an example of Lenin's betrayal of Marxism, but is it? It was not the political opinion of the richer peasants (or *kulaks*) that got them killed, but the fact that they owned land and employed other

⁴⁷ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 152-153

⁴⁸ ^Ibid.

⁴⁹ ^Idem. P. 61-62

⁵⁰ ^Idem. P. 152-153

⁵¹ Russell, B. (1920). *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* [Interview]. London

peasants. In an economic and Marxist sense, they were capitalists, because they owned property and employed others to work for them, thus ‘exploiting’ their labor⁵².

Marxists could raise the defense that ultimately, this was again due to unique Russian circumstances and Marx had nothing to do with it. Indeed, in practice, poor farmers were probably not familiar with Marx and his theories and were motivated more by jealousy than Marxist doctrine. However, this does nothing to alleviate the fact that it was Marx’s labor theory, stating that owning capital and employing people is a form of exploitation⁵³ that gave the Bolsheviks an ideological basis to excuse and encourage the killing of rich farmers. When the same farmers that carried out the killings were employed (or: enslaved) to work the farms solely to serve the red army, it was the negligence of Marx about the form of state ownership during the transitional phase that could be employed as an excuse. Of course, it is not entirely fair to pin this directly on Marx’s theory. Simply because employing people is a form of exploitation according to Marxist theory does not mean that Marx encouraged killing property owners. Marx might’ve felt that the revolution needed to use force against bourgeoisie resistance, but it was never quite clear what such resistance entailed⁵⁴. That his silence and ambiguity could be easily employed by the Bolsheviks is hardly a surprise: if socialism requires an end to private property, how exactly should the proletariat deal with those who refuse to give up their belongings? By never answering this question, Marx gave Lenin a lot of space to innovate. Lenin quoted Marx and Engels to justify his absolute power⁵⁵ and it is documented that the Cheka (the Bolshevik military police) used class struggle as an excuse for mass killings⁵⁶.

And what of the actual bourgeoisie? Along with factory workers, labor union leaders and peasants, Lenin murdered nobility, clergyman and landowners⁵⁷. Since those were not part of the proletariat even in the Marxist sense, where those murders also in conflict with Marx’s theory? Because Lovell focuses solely on authoritarianism in the political sense, and single-mindedly examines the conflict between Lenin and Marx on a difference in interpretation of who is part of the proletariat, we get no answer to these questions. So while Lovell goes into an enormous amount of detail when reviewing the most political writings of Marx and his various disciples and makes a good case for Lenin misconstruing these elements

⁵² Roemer, John (1982). *Origins of Exploitation and Class: Value Theory of Pre-Capitalist Economy*, Econometrica Vol. 50 pp. 163-192

⁵³ ^ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. P. 70

⁵⁵ Lenin, Vladimir. *State and Revolution*, Introduction, Aziloth Books, London. 2017

⁵⁶ Gellately, Robert (2008). *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler: The Age of Social Catastrophe*, p. 70

⁵⁷ Melgounov, Sergey (1975), *The Red Terror in Russia*. [Newspaper Article] Hyperions.

of Marx's work, such a massive body of crimes that also fall under Soviet Authoritarianism get brushed to the wayside, leaving Lovell's analysis ultimately toothless.

Surely to investigate real and historical, logical and necessary links, as Lovell claims to be doing, would consist of not just exploring the differences between Lenin and Marx, but also their similarities? By nitpicking differences, Marx is too easily cleared from all responsibility.

Should we hold Marx or Marxism responsible?

This brings us to our third question, whether we should view Marx's responsibility purely in causal terms, omitting any moral character to our investigation. Lovell's reasoning for doing so is that he believes Marx's disciples to be independent moral agents, whose actions Marx cannot be held responsible for. But can the same not be said for Lenin? Lenin himself was also a theorist, as well as an intellectual leader and political activist, much like Marx. He did not personally kill the landowners and bourgeoisie and had large structures of command between him and those who pulled the trigger. Granted, Lenin had more real power than Marx. While Marx did have significant political influence and worked tirelessly to kick out political rivals from his political organization⁵⁸ (the First International), he commanded no army, and the First International never executed opponents. There is a significant difference between a sphere of influence and of command. To equate them would certainly be unfair to Marx.

However, if we were to find that Marx's work gave Soviet authoritarianism its 'ideological form'⁵⁹, as Kolakowski puts it, should we see Marx simply as a causal (in Lovell's sense) influence? To say so would be to suggest that the existence of his work played an important role in the establishment of this particular authoritarian system, but that despite this, we cannot judge Marx for it in a moral sense. There are good arguments to be made for this position. First of all, as Lovell puts it, Marx's sin was one of omission. His theories had many conflicting values and seemingly paradoxical elements, and their variety of interpretations shows that they are just as likely to inspire liberal views as authoritarian ones. The problem, however, is that even if they were to produce democratic views in the majority that reads them, all real-world examples of states that claim to be built on Marxist ideas are authoritarian. If Marx's theories become dangerous as soon as they come in contact with actual power, then the line between ambiguity and gross negligence becomes dangerously thin. We should not forget that Marxism, or at least those closest to him, claimed to be a scientific method, with a predictive theory⁶⁰. If a doctor devised a cure for a disease that in practice, when people tried to implement it, turned out to not only not work, but worsen the very symptoms it was treating, he would not only be considered wrong, but grossly negligent.

⁵⁸ Lovell, D. W. (2010). *From Marx to Lenin: an evaluation of Marx's responsibility for Soviet authoritarianism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 28-29

⁵⁹ Kolakowski, L (2005). *My Correct Views on Everything*. St. Augustine's Press, *What is left of socialism* p. 2

⁶⁰ Engels, Friedrich (1880). *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*

Simply because he himself was not around to test his cure, does not excuse his mistake. If anything, we consider it more reckless to promise such great results without doing proper testing.

There are perfectly rational objections to this metaphor. After all, Marx lived in a time when science was less rigorous, and economic and political theory are quite different from medicine or any science more thoroughly grounded in physics. It can be argued that indeed, tragedies like the Soviet Union had to happen in order to find out exactly just how bad Marx's project would end up. That many of Marx's contemporary economists rejected and disproved many of his economic theories and that some of his political enemies predicted exactly what would go wrong is not enough reason to outright vilify Marx. After all, the space to experiment freely with ideas, is important for philosophers. To set the precedent of personally holding those whose ideas turn out badly personally accountable would no doubt suffocate intellectual thought and debate.

It would be a mistake however, to therefore also look at Marx's theory through a morally neutral lens. Lovell's work is a prime example of the ways in which we can excuse bad ideas on the grounds of good intentions and philosophical ambiguity. Marx himself might not be responsible, but his theories should be considered the ideological cornerstone of the authoritarian regimes that acted in its name. Furthermore, while it is fair to see authoritarian states like the Soviet Union within the context of a wide and varied tradition, the soft side of Marxism should not be used as an excuse for the philosophy as a whole, nor should Marxists be trusted to be the sole judges of Marxism.

Conclusion

That Lovell's book is the only full-length work on the responsibility of Marx for Soviet Authoritarianism is ultimately tragic, because it fails in formulating its research in a way that is inclusive of the full array of criticisms levelled against Marx. To ask whether Marx should be held responsible is a very different, much more moral question that brings forth many more questions: about the intellectual freedom and responsibility of philosophers, about the power of ideas, and about what responsibility ultimately is. Lovell does none of these things, and instead focuses on a historiography of Marxist ideas. Thus, the question that Lovell really asks, is if Marx's theory is responsible.

While Lovell provides an in depth look at the broadness of the Marxist tradition and its competing conceptions of what a transition to socialism should look like, his choice to look primarily at the differences instead of the similarities between Soviet politics and the texts that inspired them, in combination with his exclusion of non-Marxist authors, results in an unsatisfactory framing of the question.

By focusing only on Marx's most political writings, and on Marxist interpretations of those writings, Lovell misses the point of criticisms from those outside of the Marxist tradition: that it is Marx's economic analysis and predictionary character that is too blame for its authoritarian character in practice. This is not an irrelevant mistake. When the Soviet Union collapsed, well known socialist intellectual Noam Chomsky said in an interview that this was a victory for socialism because socialism is about ultimate freedom, while the Soviet Union employed its citizens as slaves⁶¹. Yet that same Chomsky more recently described wealthier Venezuelans who flee as 'capital flight' and a way in which the rich use their 'veto-power' against "policies that benefit people, not profits"⁶².

While we should be careful to conflate socialism with Marxism, as the tradition of the former is even more broad and wide, we should nevertheless notice a dangerous circular reasoning also found in Lovell's defense of Marx: socialism is about freedom, and therefore states that are not free are not socialist.

Marxism is about freedom, and therefore regimes that suppress freedom are not Marxist.

The problem is that the principles of Marxism do not lead to freedom, but that Marxism does not possess the tools to grasp why this is the case, but it does possess the tools to excuse itself from all blame, and the ideological basis for the same mistakes to be made again. When a well-respected and widely publicized intellectual can speak of refugees holding on to their possession as if they are powerful oppressors of the needy, it is clear that we have not yet completed our assessment of the dangers of Marxism, or at least not have rejected it thoroughly enough.

This is the other large problem in Lovell's work: stripping the causal link between Marxism and authoritarianism of any moral character. By asking whether Marx, instead of Marxism, is responsible, it is fairly easy to come to a resounding no. To hold someone accountable for unclear writing would be unreasonable and a dangerous precedent for intellectual freedom. Ideas, however, can be held responsible as well. And if an ideology is responsible for at least providing some ideological basis or excuse for some of the largest atrocities and death tolls in human history, it seems mandatory that we hold that ideology not just causally but morally responsible. Marxism should be taught and examined with its outcomes in mind, and we should not shy away from denouncing it.

⁶¹ Chomsky, N. (2009). How Soviet Union was the exact opposite of Socialism [Interview]. C-Span Book TV

⁶² Chomsky, N. (2010). The High Cost of Neo-Liberalism [Column]. The New Statesman.

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