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Retrospective Study of Marxism in Contemporary Russia

Sergey N. Pogodin

Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University, Saint Petersburg, Russia
pogodin_sn@spbstu.ru

Jingcheng Li

Shenzhen University, ShenZhen, People's Republic of China
jc.li@szu.edu.cn

Abstract

Introduction. The spread of Marxism in Russia was shaped by a complex set of socio-economic factors, above all the development of capitalist production based on the exploitation of wage labor, the growth of the proletariat, and the intensification of contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. An important role was also played by the formation of class self-consciousness among the working class, manifested in the struggle for its own interests and the creation of professional organizations. A substantial contribution to the scientific and practical development of Marxism was made by V. I. Lenin, who regarded it not only as a theoretical doctrine but also as a political current serving as an instrument for achieving concrete political goals. During the Soviet period, Marxist thought acquired an institutionalized form and became widely disseminated. After the collapse of the USSR, a phase of critical reassessment of Marxism began in the former Soviet republics. In contemporary Russia, two mutually exclusive tendencies can be identified: on the one hand, a consistent critique of Marxism; on the other, the continued recognition of its relevance as a theoretical and political doctrine.

Materials and methods. The source base of the study can be conventionally divided into two groups: works aimed at criticizing Marxism and studies proposing its renewed interpretation in the context of contemporary Russia. The methodological framework of the research is based on the institutional approach, as well as historical-critical and historical-comparative methods.

Results. The analysis reveals two opposing directions in the interpretation of Marxism in Russia. Criticism of Marxism is represented, first, by a right-wing discourse articulated by liberal and anti-communist authors, and second, by a left-wing strand formed by supporters of the communist idea. Studies oriented toward the rethinking of Marxism may also be divided into two types: “critical Marxism,” developed by theoretical continuators of the Marxist tradition, and “eclectic Marxism,” characteristic of works produced by representatives of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation.

Conclusion. In contemporary Russia, Marxism has not disappeared. It continues to exist as a political movement, as an ideological doctrine, and as an object of scholarly analysis. The polarity of assessments of Karl Marx's ideas—from their rejection as outdated to their recognition as relevant—

indicates that Marxism continues to generate sustained interest within Russian social and academic discourse.

Keywords: Karl Marx; V.I. Lenin; Marxism; critique of Russian Marxism; development of Marxism in Russia

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Ретроспективное изучение марксизма в современной России

Погодин Сергей Николаевич 

Санкт-Петербургский политехнический университет Петра Великого
Санкт-Петербург, Россия
pogodin_sn@spbstu.ru

Ли Цзинчэн 

Шэньчжэньский университет, г. Шэньчжэнь, Китай
✉ jc.li@szu.edu.cn

Аннотация

Введение. Распространение марксизма в России было обусловлено совокупностью сложных социально-экономических факторов, прежде всего развитием капиталистического производства, основанного на эксплуатации наёмного труда, ростом численности пролетариата и обострением его противоречий с буржуазией. Важную роль сыграло и формирование классового самосознания рабочего класса, выразившееся в борьбе за собственные интересы и создании профессиональных организаций. Существенный вклад в научное и практическое развитие марксизма внёс В. И. Ленин, который рассматривал его не только как теоретическое учение, но и как политическое течение, выступающее инструментом достижения конкретных политических целей. В советский период марксистская мысль получила институциональное оформление и широкое распространение. После распада СССР в бывших союзных республиках начался этап критики марксизма. В современной России прослеживаются две взаимоисключающие тенденции: с одной стороны, последовательная критика марксизма, с другой – сохранение его актуальности как теоретического и политического учения.

Материалы и методы. Источниковую базу исследования условно можно разделить на две группы: работы, направленные на критику марксизма, и исследования, предлагающие его новое осмысление в условиях современной России. В качестве методологической основы использованы институциональный подход, а также историко-критический и историко-сравнительный методы.

Результаты. Анализ выявил два противоположных направления в интерпретации марксизма в России. Критика марксизма представлена, во-первых, правым дискурсом либеральных авторов, во-вторых, левым направлением, сформированным сторонниками коммунистической идеи. Исследования, ориентированные на переосмысление марксизма, также делятся на два типа: «критический марксизм», развиваемый теоретическими продолжателями марксистской традиции, и «эклектический марксизм», характерный для работ представителей КИРФ.

Заключение. В современной России марксизм не утратил своего присутствия: он сохраняется как политическое движение, как идеологическое учение и как объект научного

анализа. Полярность оценок идей Карла Маркса, от их отрицания как устаревших до признания их актуальности, свидетельствует о том, что марксизм по-прежнему вызывает устойчивый интерес в российском общественном и академическом дискурсе.

Ключевые слова: Карл Маркс; В.И. Ленин; марксизм; критика российского марксизма; развитие марксизма в России

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Introduction

The emergence of the first Marxist organizations in Russia dates back to the 1880s. The rapid spread of Marxism was closely connected with the complex socio-economic conditions that had taken shape in the country, including the growth of capitalist production based on the exploitation of wage labor, the significant expansion of the proletariat, and the intensification of contradictions between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Equally important was the growing awareness of the role of the proletariat in the struggle for its own interests, as well as the establishment of workers' professional organizations. The first Marxist groups in Russia were founded by Dmitry (Dimitar) Blagoev (1856–1924) [1] and P. V. Tochissky (1864–1918) [2]. A qualitatively new stage in the dissemination of Marxist ideas is associated with the activities of G. V. Plekhanov (1856–1918) [3], who argued that the working class itself should take the initiative in the development of the communist movement.

The scientific and practical development of Marxism is inseparably linked to the name of V. I. Lenin (1870–1924) [4]. In his understanding, Marxism was a political current that functioned as an instrument for achieving specific political goals. Within Marxist philosophy, Lenin placed primary emphasis on the dialectical law of the unity and struggle of opposites. A new stage in the interpretation of Marxism in Russia/the USSR is associated with the name of I. V. Stalin (1878–1953) [5]. His understanding of Marxism differed substantially from both the classical tradition and Lenin's interpretation. Stalinist Marxism was characterized by dogmatism and schematic thinking, which to a certain extent hindered the development of culture and science.

The development of Marxist thought became particularly widespread in the USSR during the 1960s–1980s, when research centers were active and many scholars were deeply engaged in the study of Marxism. During this period, analytical works on Marxism by V. A. Vazyulin [6] and E. V. Ilyenkov [7] appeared; these studies have not lost their scholarly significance to this day. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the former ideology and model of development were subjected to systematic re-evaluation. In a number of former Soviet republics, the early stage of transformation was accompanied by a wave of criticism of Marxism. In some interpretations, the economic stagnation of the Soviet period was

attributed to the theoretical foundations of Marxism and to problems in its practical implementation [8].

At present, the Russian intellectual sphere is experiencing an intense contestation over the fate of Marxism: on the one hand, there are critical interpretations that regard it as an outdated ideology; on the other hand, there are constructive reassessments that affirm its analytical value for understanding contemporary socio-economic processes. This situation of oppositional coexistence constitutes the logical starting point for examining the actual position of Marxism within contemporary Russian intellectual and political discourse.

This article focuses on the critical reflection on and creative reinterpretation of Marxism within contemporary Russian scholarship. The study aims, through a typological analysis, to identify the principal theoretical approaches used to evaluate Marxism and to explore the mechanisms that sustain its continued presence in academic debates. The article addresses three key questions. First, what are the central arguments of contemporary Russian critiques of Marxism? Second, what are the main directions in which scholars are reconstructing Marxist theory? Third, what social and intellectual conditions explain why Marxism continues to attract sustained academic attention in present-day Russia?

Materials and Methods

The materials used in this article can be conventionally divided into two groups. The first group consists of works devoted to the critique of Marxism in contemporary Russia, reflected in the studies of E. T. Gaidar and V. A. Mau [9], V. K. Kudrov [10], V. Ryzhkov [11], E. V. Pashintseva [12], D. A. Davydov [13], and I. A. Inshakov [14]. The second group includes works focused on a renewed interpretation of Marxism in modern Russia. This group comprises studies by A. V. Buzgalin and A. I. Kolganov [15], V. M. Mezhuev [16], A. S. Kazenkov [17], M. F. Chernysh [18], N. V. Asonov [19], A. I. Kolganov [20], E. V. Zolotukhina-Abolina and V. E. Zolotukhin [21], as well as V. V. Evglevsky [22].

The methodological foundation of the study is based on the institutional approach, which makes it possible to examine the evolution of social institutions. The application of the historical-critical method enabled a critical analysis of Marxist sources and their interpretations. The use of the historical-comparative method made it possible to identify the regularities and distinctive features of contemporary Marxism.

Findings

Critique of Marxism in Contemporary Russia

In the article by E. V. Pashintseva [12], criticism directed at Marxism is analyzed, and two main critical theses are identified. First, the revolutionary events in Russia are described as having occurred “not according to Marx,” since the country was not economically prepared for such transformations and should have awaited similar developments in more advanced industrial states. Second, it is argued that the Bolsheviks who came to power imposed a Marxist ideology alien to Russia [12, p. 48]. Criticism of Marxism is thus closely linked to the Soviet-period interpretation of Karl Marx’s doctrine. A similar understanding is presented in the work of E. T. Gaidar and V. A. Mau [9], who argue that in Russian society at the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the twenty-first century a strongly negative attitude toward Marxism prevailed. They note that “a natural reaction of rejection occurs. The Russian intelligentsia of middle age does not wish to think about Marxism. Young

people raised in the post-Soviet period are not interested in Marxism” [9]. This assertion, however, is evidently to some extent arbitrary; it represents a specific product of the period of socio-economic transformation in Russia and can hardly be generalized as a dominant consensus of an entire historical stage.

The article by V. K. Kudrov [10] offers a critical examination of the fundamental foundations of Marxist economic theory and compares them with the realities of XX century life. Particular attention is paid to the labor theory of value, surplus value, the laws of capitalist accumulation, and the concepts of absolute and relative impoverishment of the proletariat. The author concludes that Marx’s theory is utopian and untenable, and argues for the creation of a new economic theory capable of responding to the challenges of the XXI century.

The works of contemporary Russian scholars D. A. Davydov [13] and I. A. Inshakov [14] address the critique of Marxism in foreign political science. Davydov advances the idea of a “crisis dead end” for Marxism, claiming that it has ceased to develop and entered a period of stagnation; this thesis is supported by references to Western scholars. In assessing this position, it can be noted that the article has a certain value, but primarily as a critique of neo-Marxism and Western Marxist approaches, rather than of Marxism as such. In the article by I. A. Inshakov, the thesis is advanced that Karl Marx combined “utopian” and “scientific” approaches in his thinking. A critique of this position is offered by N. Lopatin, whose conclusions appear persuasive: “At the same time, the author fails to take into account the historical, scientific, and socio-political context. For him, Marxism is a spherical horse in a vacuum: it seems to exist, but is separated from everything and does not develop. As a result, the author ‘criticizes’ Marxism of the mid—if not the late—nineteenth century, which is very convenient”¹.

Studies of Marxism in Contemporary Russia

At present, contemporary interpretations of Marxism are experiencing a renaissance in the social sciences [18]. In modern Russian political literature, works defending Marxism have appeared. Among them is the monograph by V. M. Mezhuev, *Marx against Marxism: Essays on an Unpopular Topic* [16]. This work analyzes the discrepancies between Karl Marx’s doctrine and its interpretations by “Soviet Marxists.” The author examines in detail Marx’s understanding of history, culture, and society, while demonstrating fundamental divergences between Marx’s own views and those of the “scholars” who judged him from “Soviet positions.” Mezhuev notes that “a return to Marx is as inevitable as our transition to a capitalist-type market economy” [16, p. 7].

The authors of the article «Dialectics in the Contemporary Era: The Relevance of the Ideas of Hegel and Marx» likewise conclude that “Marxism continues to remain an important foundation for the analysis of power and systems of social inequality. Serious inequalities generated under conditions of globalization once again draw attention to the materialist interpretation of history and the need for social transformation” [24, p. 711].

A. I. Kolganov argues that “the scientific legacy of K. Marx contains a number of long-term historical forecasts that have received brilliant confirmation in our time. The

¹ Лопатин Н. Академическая критика марксизма: как в вузах разбирают «соломенное чучело»: [сайт]. URL: <https://vk.com/@lopatin2024-akademicheskaya-kritika-marksizma-kak-v-vuzah-razbiraut-solo> (дата обращения: 10.01.2026).

development of Marx's ideas in contemporary Marxism provides a solid theoretical basis for understanding the fundamental contradictions of modernity" [20].

In Russia, Marxism exists in a wide variety of currents. Russian political scientist L. V. Smorgunov [25] identifies two principal directions: the first, "critical Marxism," represented primarily by the works of A. V. Buzgalin and A. I. Kolganov; and the second, "eclectic Marxism," developed in the writings of G. A. Zyuganov. "Critical Marxists consider themselves the most consistent continuators of Marxist doctrine and claim to provide an adequate expression of the 'left-wing' socialist and communist movement in Russia," Smorgunov notes [26, p. 128].

"Critical Marxism" is grounded in Karl Marx's dialectical method, which makes it possible to critically analyze contemporary socio-economic conditions. It sets as its goal the elaboration of a transition from modern capitalism to the ideals of socialism and communism. From the perspective of critical Marxism, objective prerequisites for such a transition already exist in contemporary society. These include, first, the presence of the creative potential of human labor as a decisive factor of modern progress; second, the replacement of the previously dominant rational actor, homo economicus, by a new type of personality, homo creator, characterized by creative potential and the ability to transform the world; third, the transformation of the biosphere – from being viewed merely as a source of raw materials – into a cultural value, whose reproduction has become a central function of progress; and fourth, the vast cultural wealth created by humanity, which contributes to further social development [27].

According to Smorgunov, a weakly developed aspect of "critical Marxism" is the practical organization of the transition from capitalism to socialism. He concludes that it "represents a marginal current that exerts no serious influence on political discourse in society, on social science research agendas, or on political practice" [27, p. 114].

"Eclectic Marxism," by contrast, represents an association of scholars seeking to remain faithful to Marxism while simultaneously taking into account new processes and phenomena such as globalization, informatization, and democratization. This direction is pragmatic in character and aims to expand its social base [27]. From the perspective of eclectic Marxism, global capitalism itself constitutes the condition for a transition to socialism, as it creates the material foundation for a just social order. According to Smorgunov, "the two most important approaches through which contemporary Russian communist ideologues and politicians attempt to enrich Marxism are geopolitics and the theory of civilizations" [25]. In his view, eclectic Marxism turns to ideas of nationalism, using this ideology against capitalist globalization [25]. Supporters of eclectic Marxism, however, reject this interpretation, arguing that it is precisely the creative synthesis of Marxist methodology with the intellectual heritage of Russian thinkers that will serve as the foundation for the emergence of a modern domestic socialism [27].

The principal ideologue of "eclectic Marxism" is the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, G. A. Zyuganov. A comprehensive analysis of his statements from different periods reveals a certain degree of inconsistency. At the same time, his discourse clearly reflects the core ideas of Marxism, particularly the historical inevitability of capitalism's demise. Zyuganov states: "The fundamental discoveries of Marx and Engels have demonstrated that capitalism – whose dead-end stage is today's globalization – is

historically doomed. By multiplying poverty and hardship, it simultaneously increases the number of those in whom protest against this exploitative and unjust system grows, a protest that ultimately leads to its collapse [23].”

Other Directions of Marxist Research in Russia

According to contemporary Russian scholars who develop the intellectual legacy of Karl Marx, future research in Russia is likely to proceed along several major directions, including philosophy, the dialectics of cognition, methodology, economics, and social theory.

In the philosophical system developed by Karl Marx, central attention is devoted to the human being as a fundamentally practical entity oriented toward transforming the world in order to realize human needs [28, p. 6]. Russian scholars regard this thesis as foundational for the further development of Marxism, as it is grounded in the principles of systemic analysis, scientific rigor, and the methodology of materialist dialectics. These principles, in their view, provide potential pathways out of the spiritual and intellectual crisis currently affecting philosophical thought [28, p. 19].

A defining feature of the twenty-first century is the process of globalization, which has exacerbated inequalities between countries and within societies, while also generating ecological crises. Under these conditions, Marxist dialectics emerges as a crucial analytical instrument for examining transformations in social, economic, and ecological systems. From the perspective of Russian Marxists, the application of Karl Marx’s dialectical method to the realities of the twenty-first century serves as an important factor stimulating social movements that struggle for justice and equality [24].

According to A. V. Buzgalin, Professor at the Faculty of Philosophy of Moscow State University, Marxist methodology and theory acquire particular significance in contemporary conditions because they “help address the tasks of researching global problems of humanity, including the social forms and consequences of the new technological revolution and the profoundly transformed economic system” [29, p. 32]. In the field of economics, Marxism is also seen as possessing certain advantages, since the economic realities of the twenty-first century are marked by crisis phenomena in economic theory itself. Russian researchers argue that a way out of this crisis can only be found through Marxism. Karl Marx’s studies of economic development were based on dialectical, methodological, and theoretical principles elaborated earlier in philosophical and economic thought [30].

V. V. Mironov, Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at Moscow State University and Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, notes that “even today it is possible to identify a number of ideas within Marx’s conceptual framework that can serve as the basis for the construction of developed social theories. Above all, this includes a complex of philosophical-anthropological ideas related to the understanding of the human being as a creature that transforms the world” [31]. In developing the concept of human essence, Karl Marx integrated human social activity into a unified process of self-transformation, as well as the transformation of society and nature [32].

A review of contemporary Russian academic literature indicates that discussions of Marxism have evolved along two principal trajectories. The first is critical reassessment – some scholars tend to associate Marxist theory with the historical experience of the Soviet Union and, on this basis, subject it to critical evaluation, raising fundamental doubts about its

explanatory power in the current economic and social spheres. The second is creative transformation, when researchers emphasize that Marxism still retains considerable theoretical capacity for interpreting contemporary socio-political and economic changes and attempt to adapt and reconstruct its methodological principles under new historical conditions. Thus, Marxism in contemporary Russia demonstrates a dual character—it is both an object of reflection and critique and a theoretical framework that continues to be actively developed. It is precisely this coexistence of critical reconsideration and constructive reinterpretation that sustains Marxism’s enduring vitality and scholarly attention within Russian academic discourse.

Discussion and Conclusion

As a result of the study, two mutually exclusive directions in the study of Marxism in Russia were analyzed: the first is the critique of Marxism, and the second is a positive attitude toward Marxism. An analysis of works devoted to the critique of Marxism reveals two main tendencies. The first is criticism from the right, represented by the writings of liberal authors. The second is criticism from the left, articulated by supporters of the communist idea.

In contemporary Russia, Marxism has not disappeared following the intensive critical campaign of the 1990s. It continues to exist in politics as a political movement, in ideology as a theoretical doctrine, and in scholarship as an object of academic inquiry. Russian scholars’ assessments of Karl Marx’s ideas are sharply polarized. Analysis of studies devoted to Marxism in modern Russia also reveals two main directions. The first, “critical Marxism,” is represented by works produced by continuators of the Marxist tradition. The second, “eclectic Marxism,” is reflected in the writings of representatives of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation. Some researchers argue that Marxism was created in the nineteenth century and can no longer be relevant to contemporary Russian realities. Others, by contrast, consider it relevant under present conditions and become its active proponents. These opposing views indicate that Marxism continues to generate a certain degree of interest within Russian society today.

The diversity of interpretations of Marxism in Russia points to an ongoing creative search for alternatives to contemporary society. As noted, “the creation of a modern theory of socialism that corresponds to the tendencies of the development of world civilization under conditions of increasing globalization constitutes the most important task of the philosophy of creative Marxism” [33].

Partial propositions of Karl Marx may appear inconsistent with the present-day realities of Russia. Nevertheless, Marxist theory in the field of economics remains an important school of theoretical and methodological thought for humanity as a whole. Marxist philosophy retains its relevance in many respects even today. Under current conditions, Marxist philosophical research, grounded in the principles of systemic analysis and materialist dialectics, creates the prerequisites for overcoming the spiritual crisis confronting contemporary philosophical thought worldwide. Of particular importance is the dialectical approach, which facilitates a critical reflection on contemporary reality. It stimulates the search for new alternative paths of development and serves as a foundation for the elaboration of new concepts aimed at creating better conditions for human existence.

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Information about authors / Сведения об авторах

Pogodin Sergey N. – Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, Academic Director, Higher School of International Relations, Institute of Humanities; Peter the Great Saint Petersburg Polytechnic University.

E-mail: pogodin_sn@spbstu.ru

ORCID: 0000-0002-0095-8986

Li Jingcheng – Corresponding Author, PhD., Assistant Professor, Director of the Centre for Russian and Central Asian Studies at the College of International Studies; Shenzhen University.

E-mail: jc.li@szu.edu.cn

ORCID: 0000-0003-1764-3873

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Погодин Сергей Николаевич – доктор исторических наук, профессор, научный руководитель Высшей школы международных отношений Гуманитарного института; Санкт-Петербургский политехнический университет Петра Великого.

E-mail: pogodin_sn@spbstu.ru

ORCID: 0000-0002-0095-8986

Ли Цзинчэн – корреспондирующий автор, кандидат политических наук, ассистент-профессор, директор Центра российских и центральноазиатских исследований Института международных исследований; Шэньчжэньский университет.

E-mail: jc.li@szu.edu.cn

ORCID: 0000-0003-1764-3873

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