The Right's Fantasy of a "Marxist" Threat

A review of Mark R. Levin, American Marxism (2021)

Wayne Price

December 2021

Contents

This book is popular on the right. Its thesis is that there is a Marxist movement (or set of movements) which is taking over much of U.S. society. Marxists supposedly dominate public schools, universities, the media, teacher unions and other unions, the anti-racist movement, the ecological movement, business boardrooms (!), and the Democratic Party—and therefore the presidency and Congress. This is mad on the face of it, yet **American Marxism** has been a best seller for weeks. Its author is a Fox tv performer, a former part of the Reagan administration, and the author of a series of books. Personally I find the book poorly written and illogical, stuffed with lengthy quotations from friends and foes, yet obviously many people like it. Therefore it is worth looking at.

There are some things which Mark Levin gets right. Marx's theories have been used as rationalizations and ideologies justifying "the enslavement, impoverishment, torture, and death of untold millions" (p. 243). It may be argued that this was not Marx's intention, and that his world view was originally based in radical democracy and the emancipation of the working class—and that there has always been a minority of Marxists who have held to this vision. It may be claimed that his analysis of how capitalism works is highly useful (I agree but Levin strongly dissents). However this may be, Marxism has repeatedly led to bureaucratic-totalitarian states which oppressed and murdered millions of workers, peasants, and others.

Many on the Left have admired and even worshipped these repressive regimes and their Marxist leaders. For example, recently, on July 11th, thousands of Cubans nationwide demonstrated and the Communist state repressed their protests. Yet part of the Left offered its support to the Cuban state (as did the leadership of Black Lives Matter). Some Leftists, such as Bernie Sanders, opposed that state's crackdown, but many others were silent at best. They "changed the topic" to the evils of the U.S. quarantine. This is an important issue, but the reason Cuba was in the news was the popular demonstrations.To focus solely on the crimes of U.S. imperialism, and not offer solidarity to the Cuban protestors, was shameful. However, this does not justify Levin lumping all oppositional movements together as "Marxist" and authoritarian.

I am not a Marxist, nor a liberal nor a "progressive," and certainly not a Democrat. I identify as a revolutionary anarchist-socialist. I believe that the consistent devolution of Marxism into state-capitalist dictatorships is rooted in certain weaknesses—its program of taking state power, its centralism, and its determinism. These were pointed out by anarchists when Marx first developed his views.

However, it is unclear just what Levin means by "Marxism." He cites the theories of Karl Marx, which makes sense: "Marxists" are followers of Marx. But even for Levin it would be a stretch to claim that all these institutions and movements are led by conscious followers of Marx, students of **The Communist Manifesto** and **Capital**. So he also refers to various social forces as "Marxist-like," "progressive/Marxist-oriented," "Marxist-based," "Marxist-type," "neo-Marxist," "Marxist-racist," "Marxist-anarchist," "Marxist-centric," "eco-Marxist," "Marxist-associated," and, in general, "Marxist-inspired and related social movements" (p. 135). He summarizes, "Even if one does not accept a direct link or parallel to classical Marxism …it need not be. The movements are said [by Levin!—WP] to be developed from or tailored after Marxist ideology" (pp. 135–6).

He even notes that Marxist theory, in what he sees as its wide-spread influence, has splintered into a wide variety of ideological and political viewpoints, often contradictory to each other. He mentions that there are "purist" Marxists who complain about Critical Race Theory's lack of class analysis. He cites radical ecologists who criticize Marxism for what they see as its pro-growth orientation. "Of course, all of Marxism's incarnations, as practiced and where imposed, need not

be identical in every respect and, in fact, differ" (p. 55). But he claims that "American progressives" share the "same core beliefs" (p. 55). As usual he merges "progressives" with "Marxists."

In the fifties I read a book similar in aim to this, by J. Edgar Hoover, chief of the FBI. It was **Masters of Deceit**, about the dire influence of the Communist Party. Similar books opposed to Marxism, written during the sixties and seventies, focused on the Communist Party, as well as on various parties and organizations of Trotskyists and Maoists and others. Today Mark Levin writes about U.S. Marxism but says nothing whatever about the Communist Party nor other Marxist-Leninist parties. Instead he focuses on broad movements, such as Black Lives Matter (a loose association of groupings), and Antifa (more of a movement than an organization). He traces chains of influence rather than organizational ties.

The decline of Marxist-Leninist radical parties is partially due to the collapse of the Soviet Union and of its satellites in 1989–91, and the turn of China to an openly market-oriented economy—even if it is still ruled by a "Communist" Party. (That confuses Levin who still refers to "Communist China.") The continued influence of Marxism, which is Levin's main concern, is due however to the observable decline in the capitalist society: its economic stagnation, its growing climate catastrophe, its pandemic, its political polarization including the growth of semi-fascism. Levin denies all these factors and claims that there is a radicalization growing without any real objective causes. In fact, there is a growth of a new socialist movement, but rather than being Marxist-Leninist it identifies as "democratic socialist." There has been an increase in people regarding themselves as anarchists, rather than Marxists. (Levin creates a strange amalgam of "Marxist-anarchists", pointing to Antifa, BLM, and the Weather Underground of the sixties, of which only Antifa has anarchist influences.)

Central Beliefs of Marxism and Anarchism

What is striking about the movements of opposition today, and even the spread of "Marxist-oriented" ideas, is the extent to which they reject two central tenets of classical Marxism—concepts which were shared with revolutionary anarchism. These are (1) *the potential central role of the working class in fighting capitalism.* Most current radicals do not see the working class as even one of three or five main forces in changing society. For example, the anti-racist movement (which Levin claims is just an extension of Critical Race Theory) focuses on the oppression of Black people and other People of Color by white people. Class issues are pretty much ignored. So is the concept that the exploitation of white working people by the capitalist class is supported by the use of racism and white supremacy. Similarly, Levin spends some time on the theories of Herbert Marcuse, without focusing on Marcuse's central view that the modern working class has been totally absorbed into capitalist society.

(2) Also rejected is *the eventual goal of a revolution by the working class and all oppressed.* This aims to take away the wealth of the capitalists, to socialize their industries, to dismantle their state, and replace these institutions with new ones based on self-management, freedom, and cooperation. Levin refers to the work of Professor Frances Fox Piven as revolutionary. She advocated a militant "poor people's movement" which would demonstrate and commit mass civil disobedience. But her goal was to shake up the government, to pressure the Democratic Party, and to get more benefits from the government. She was a militant reformist, not a revolutionary.

Levin interprets these rejections of central concepts of Marxism (and of anarchism) as being assertions of Marxism! He interprets any division of society into oppressor and oppressed as essentially the same as a class analysis. However, there is a large difference between seeing that some people are oppressed, mistreated, and discriminated against—and understanding that society runs on squeezing surplus labor from those who are employed to work for bosses. The first insight may be important, but it remains limited.

Levin interprets any attempt to make society better, to decrease racism, to improve people's lives, to mitigate climate change, as advocating revolution. He sees electing Democrats as the equivalent to overthrowing the state. He cannot distinguish among liberals, authoritarian revolutionaries, and libertarian-democratic revolutionaries. They are all one to him, enemies of everything he holds good.

Some of his arguments, however, are simply bizarre. He claims that the Democrats want to make it easier to go to higher education (cancelling debts and supporting state colleges) because they want more young people to be exposed to Marxist indoctrination! He claims that progressives want to let more immigrants into the country so that the Democrats would have more voters.

It is difficult to know how much of Mark Levin's misstatements are due to his misunderstanding, or to ignorance, or to deliberate obfuscation. Some of his errors are small, such as referring to Marx's ideology of "material historicism" instead of the correct "historical materialism" (58). Or referring to the Marxist Frankfurt School as the "Franklin School" (82). Or reprinting long passages from the philosopher Hannah Arendt about totalitarianism, without realizing that she was not only denouncing Stalinist Communism but also right-wing fascism.

Another example is his discussion of the great liberal John Dewey (1859—1952). Today Dewey has little influence outside of philosophy and education departments. But to Levin, "the social activist journalists who now populate the vast majority of U.S. newsrooms are John Dewey followers" (p. 204). No evidence is cited for this remarkable statement. Levin refers to "Dewey's call for a public, top-down, government-managed 'socialism'…" (p. 49). Any reading of Dewey's works or a biography of Dewey would show that he championed decentralized, bottom-up federalism, and neighborly communities[1]. Dewey opposed state socialism in favor of worker-managed cooperative industries, as was advocated at the time by British "guild socialists" (reformist anarcho-syndicalists). He was an advocate of participatory democracy in the community, in schools, and at work.

To make Dewey sound like a Marxist, Levin quotes him agreeing with Marx about the importance of economic factors. He refers to Dewey's positive (and naive) report on the Russian schools in 1928 (before the full force of the Stalinist counterrevolution settled in). But again, any biography of Dewey would discuss his lifelong rejection of Marxism, and his increasingly vehement opposition to the Communism of the Soviet Union and its supporters. The truth is exactly the opposite of Mark Levin's account.

It is hardly worth reviewing Levin's climate-change denialism. He baldly denies that there is a consensus of scientists that the climate is heating up, creating all sorts of extreme weather events and catastrophes even now. "The 'climate-change' movement…is a broad-based war on your property rights, liberty , and way of life" (p. 271). Unfortunately no ones' property rights or liberty will be worth much in a drought-ridden, burned-out, and/or flooded world. Levin's oppo-

[1] Westbrook, Robert B. (1991). **John Dewey and American Democracy.** Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

sition to doing something about climate change is no joke. It threatens the future of civilization, and the survival of humanity and our fellow creatures.

Oddly enough, although his book was published in 2021, he says nothing about the pandemic, except for one phrase denouncing "the coronavirus pandemic authoritarians" (p. 249). Nor does he raise the issue of women's right to abortions, although it is a major topic on the right. This issue is an authoritarian demand that legislatures, police, and courts have control over the most personal aspects of women's lives.

Projection

Much of Levin's work demonstrates the psychological concept of "projection." This is a defense mechanism where people imagine that the traits they dislike about themselves are really embodied in their opponents, who can be denounced for their own proclivities. Levin denounces the Democratic Party (which he sees as indistinguishable from liberalism and Marxism) as "an autocratic, power-hungry, ideological movement that rejects political and traditional comity and seeks to permanently crush its opposition—and emerge as the sole political and governmental power" (p. 6). Could there be a better summary of the "movement conservatism" of the right-wing Republican Party?

He denounces the Democrats for waging a campaign of lies and distortions about its opponents—as if Trump were not a pathological liar who ended his presidential tenure by pushing the Big Lie that he won the 2020 election. He attacks the Democrats for stacking the courts—when Mitch McConnell stonewalled Democratic court nominations and then pushed forward dozens of reactionary, pro-business and anti-choice, federal judges. He claims that the Democrats are trying to distort the voting process when Republican state governments have raised hundreds of bills to limit the popular vote, especially in Black districts. (I am not trying to defend the Democrats; unlike Levin I can distinguish among the Democrats, various types of Marxists, and anarchists.)

He is a fanatical supporter of capitalism, while simultaneously denouncing the U.S. capitalist class. For many, he claims, "their boardrooms, management, and workforce are 'down for the revolution'….Many corporatists have simply abandoned capitalism for statism….Today's ruling class or elites disdain our country" (p. 10). He cites a quotation that "America has a bad elite….inspired by…a deracinated globalist perspective…" (p. 10). Levin charges that "there are too many corporations committed to the various Marxist-Critical Theory movements…." (p. 248). Worst of all, "companies have now openly partnered with the Democratic Party against the Republican Party" (p. 263). Thus he manages the neat trick of opposing the U.S. ruling class while fiercely supporting their system and opposing their radical enemies.

The use of projection is made explicit in Levin's chapter on his proposed program of action. He advocates using the very methods which he claims are being used by the evil Marxists. "We must use the Marxist's strategy and tactics against him" (p. 252). What is evil in the hands of the Marxists smells of perfume when done by right-wingers.

He proposes to use the methods of "Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions" as developed by the "extremist enemies" of Israel (p. 252). While claiming to be all for freedom, he proposes a massive attack on the left, a revival of the McCarthyite hysterical anti-communist witch hunt. Remember,

he does not distinguish among Marxists, progressives, and Democrats. To him, all are essentially the same and need to be rooted out.

He proposes boycotting and withdrawing from corporations and banks, as well as sports events, universities, and entertainment, which, in his opinion "are engaged in promoting American Marxism and its various movements" (p. 252). He calls for pressure on local and state governments to stop subsidizing "Marxism." This freedom-loving patriot demands that governments "ban the teaching and indoctrination of Critical Race Theory (CRT), Critical Gender Theory, etc., from taxpayer-financed public schools" (p. 252–3). "Patriots" should organize in every school district, overwhelm the school board at open meetings, and take over the school boards. They should re-write teacher union contracts to prevent teachers from supposedly proselytizing for Marxism or Critical Race Theory (this would have to be enforced by right-wing parents and students). They should aim for de-establishing public schools and replace them with charter schools and "vouchers for private and parochial schools" (p. 257). Colleges and universities should face anti-fund raising campaigns, pressure on state legislatures in the case of subsidized state universities. Students should denounce their professors for "propagandizing" (p. 263).

Dealing with supposedly traitorous corporations, he proposes boycotts, protests, and overwhelming shareholder meetings. He wants to "lobby state legislators to investigate those corporations…and pressure them to divest all state pensions and other funds from these companies" (p. 265). He calls for antitrust policies to be used agains Big Tech and similar companies which are not sufficiently supportive of far-right politics. Another expression of how freedom-loving he is.

He wants to fight the anti-climate change movement through lawsuits and cutting off tax-exemptions. He hopes to fight Black Lives Matter by increasing legal penalties against rioting and violence. His model is Gov. Ron DeSantis in Florida. Police officers should be able to bring civil suits against anyone who attacks them, as well as against organizations whose programs led to riots and violence, "such as Antifa and BLM" (p. 276).

After this call for increased surveillance and repression, of acting like the very authoritarians he claims to oppose, Mark Levin closes with the cry, "We chose liberty! Patriots of America unite!" (p. 276). There is a cute final picture of his late family dog.

The psychologist Erich Fromm wrote **Escape from Freedom**[2] to explain the attraction which Nazism had for so many ordinary Germans. He believed that large numbers of people, mostly from the lower middle classes, had felt adrift, alienated from society, threatened by both those below them and the elite above them, overwhelmed by modern times, lost and confused. They wanted a strong leader who would tell them what to think, feel, and do. The worldview of the Nazis was nonsense, but it gave so many Germans a sense of community, solidarity, and meaning, someone to hate (the Jews) and someone to adore (Adolph Hitler). (This analysis fits well with that of Hannah Arendt, in the extensive quotations Levin provides.)

Levin is not a Nazi although he is trending towards fascism. He is correct on the authoritarianism of most Marxists and some liberals. Otherwise he presents a total fantasy, an image of the country being taken over by Marxists and sort-of Marxists, an extreme danger (while denying real extreme dangers, such as climate catastrophe). He offers the discontented an explanation of their problems, a community of the like-minded, an enemy to hate, and a leader to love. As the Nazis (National Socialists) claimed to be "socialists" to fit in with the political culture of Ger-

[2] Fromm, Erich (1941). **Escape from Freedom**. NY: Farrar & Rinehart.

many at the time, so Levin and his fellow "conservatives" claim to "love liberty." However, he is no more a lover of liberty than the Nazis were socialists. He is an extreme authoritarian and nationalist, as comes clear in his program. The popularity of this book should worry those who do love freedom.

Wayne Price
The Right's Fantasy of a "Marxist" Threat
A review of Mark R. Levin, American Marxism (2021)
December 2021

Retrieved on 21st April 2022 from www.h-net.org
Published in *H-Socialisms*.

theanarchistlibrary.org