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## The Crisis of Marxism (Lecture delivered in Nijmegen on 27 May 1978)

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Dear friends, dear comrades: I'm deeply touched by the fraternal invitation that Nijmegen's student movement has extended to me. I know that the Nijmegen student movement is facing special challenges, but you're the proof – as all the initiatives I've heard about go to show – that you're capable of meeting them and moving ahead.

I shall be talking to you today about the crisis of Marxism. I'm going to talk about it in terms that are as simple and clear as possible. You'll see that you actually already know everything I'm about to say. The only difference, if one can speak of a difference, is that I'm going to try to put a certain “order and connection” in the things you know quite as well as I do, an “order and connection corresponding to the order and connection of things” (Spinoza).

We're experiencing a paradoxical situation that we've never known before and that history has never known before. On the one hand, we can say that imperialism is in crisis, and at the same time we can say that imperialism has never been as powerful as it is. We can say – this is obvious, as we shall see – that Marxism too is experiencing a very deep crisis of a kind it has never known before, but at the same time we can say that Marxism has before it a future of a kind it has perhaps never had before.

I will immediately be met with an objection: “How can you contrast, how can you compare imperialism, which is a global economic, political, and ideological system, with Marxism, which is just a theory?” My answer to this objection is that Marxism isn't only a theory. We have to take the word “Marxism” in the strong sense; that is, we have to propose a definition of “Marxism” in the expression “the crisis of Marxism.”

Spinoza proceeded by way of definitions, and we shall too. I propose the following definition of “Marxism”: Marxism, in the phrase “crisis of Marxism,” designates *the whole set of economic, political, ideological, and theoretical<sup>1</sup> forms of existence bearing a relation to Marxism or brought into relation with Marxism*. I think that this provisional definition is good enough to allow us to go further.

Let me now proceed to define “crisis” so as to try to clarify what we mean when we talk about a crisis of Marxism. The word crisis can be given three different meanings. These three different meanings ultimately come down to two different, opposed meanings.

In a first sense, we have to do with a negative definition of crisis. A crisis is a critical state

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<sup>1</sup> In the original, the adjectives appear sometimes with an s at the end, sometimes without. I've added s's where they're lacking, so that the adjectives always modify “forms.” In French, the singular and plural forms of the

preceding destruction and death. Thus we talk about a *crise cardiaque* [a heart attack, literally, a “heart crisis”], which often has a very bad end. So I shall say that “crisis” evokes death. In Western literature, perhaps in all of world literature, the crisis that evokes death is represented by sunset.

There is, however, a second sense of the word crisis that is not negative, but positive. The positive sense is hidden beneath the negative one. The positive sense could say, like Descartes, *larvatus prodeo* (I advance masked).<sup>2</sup> We talk, say, about a growth crisis or a crisis of adolescence: we talk about a crisis in order to make it understood that something new is in the process of being born in the old individual. Here crisis makes us think of rebirth [*renaissance*]. Rebirth is a second birth. In Western literature, it is represented by sunrise. That metaphor is explicitly commented on by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.

With that, we have the provisional definitions we need in order to talk about the crisis of Marxism. We’ve proposed a definition *for Marxism*, a definition that is provisional, but good enough for now. We’ve defined what a crisis is, and that’s enough for the time being.

The word crisis has a third sense. This sense adds nothing new to the first two. Nothing new. We talk, for example, about a *critical moment*. This means that we’re uncertain and don’t really know whether the crisis will culminate in death or rebirth.

With that, I’ve finished with crisis and can move on to something else.

I shall formulate my next question this way: Why can a communist talk about the crisis of Marxism today? It hasn’t been all that long that communists have been able to talk about the crisis of Marxism. I say “been able to,” as communists and in public. Why, then, can a communist talk, as a communist and in public, about the crisis of Marxism today? First of all, because the crisis *exists*; it’s real. Secondly, because the crisis is *overt* [*ouvert*], in the sense Lenin gives that word, meaning there for all to see. Thirdly, because the crisis *is no longer covered up* [*recouvert*]. That’s not at all the same thing as saying that it’s overt.

To say that the crisis is no longer covered up means that it’s no longer repressed, that the repression that made the crisis invisible has been historically lifted. This means, fourthly, that the crisis of Marxism can be *declared, publicly declared*, and so proclaimed with knowledge of what’s involved: that is to say, declared in a declaration that provides the beginnings of the

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adjectives sound the same. Translator.

<sup>2</sup> The parenthetical phrase is Althusser’s. Translator.

elements of knowledge of the crisis. The last stipulation is important. For anyone is capable of talking about the Soviet Union's crisis, the socialist countries' crisis, the French Communist Party's crisis, and so on and so forth. It's clear that it's not enough to talk about them; one has also to begin to explain what one is talking about. Without explanation, words are just hot air.

To be able to talk about the crisis of Marxism, it's not enough to be a Marxist. One has to be a Marxist to say that the crisis of Marxism is overt and declared [*sic*]. Declared in the strong sense of the word; if you like, in the legal sense of a public declaration. That is, *declared with knowledge of what's involved*; that is, declared in terms that provide the beginnings of an explanation. It will be said that all this is unproblematic. But all this presupposes one little thing: namely, that the crisis of Marxism *exists*.

Let me remind you that I've proposed three definitions of the word crisis: crisis as death's antechamber or prelude; crisis as a sign of rebirth; and crisis as uncertainty between death and rebirth. It would be very complicated to try to respond to these three different definitions together. I would have to have more time to explain things. So I'm going to *take a shortcut*. To do so, I'm going to make use of a symptom that can stand in for these three definitions of crisis by summing them up. I shall call this symptom *the symptom of absence*. And I shall say what follows.

*First.* We are taking Marxism in the sense in which I just defined it, in other words, as an ensemble of the economic, political, ideological, and theoretical forms of existence bearing a relation to, or which can be brought into relation to, Marxism. That's our starting point. Here's what I have to say of importance, but which you know as well as I do.

In the universe comprising the ensemble of Marxism's forms of existence, in other words, in the world of economic, political, ideological, and theoretical Marxism thus defined, we observe an absolutely prodigious phenomenon that humanity hasn't known on this scale since the period of the Reformation: the *generalized phenomenon of absence*. I shall explain what I mean.

Marxism is absent from its current economic forms of existence.<sup>3</sup> In the Soviet Union, for example: Is it a socialist country or something else? It isn't easy to answer this question. If Marxism were present in the Soviet Union, it would answer for us.

*Second.* I'm giving examples in a very schematic way here. I emphasize the very schematic

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<sup>3</sup> My transcription contains the equivalent of "current forms of economic existence." I've added an s to économique. Translator.

nature of these examples because, if we were to go into them in detail, we would need a long time, and we would see that matters are a great deal more complicated. That's why I shall say that Marxism is *absent from its political*<sup>4</sup> *forms of existence*. We can take the example of the Soviet Union or the Eastern European countries. We can also take the example of the Western Communist Parties.

When we analyze the politics of the Soviet Union or the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, when we examine the politics of the Western Communist Parties, we have to admit that, *overall*, Marxism is absent from them. Moreover, it sometimes happens that these parties more or less admit it.

*Third.* Marxism is absent from its ideological<sup>5</sup> forms of existence. One need only examine the ideology of the socialist countries to realize that it doesn't have much to do, despite its declarations, with Marxist ideology. This is something that is quite well known. What *does* dominate in the socialist countries is bourgeois ideology. We can talk about that in the discussion session.

*Fourth.* Marxism is absent from its theoretical forms of existence.<sup>6</sup> In the Soviet Union, it is completely absent from its official theoretical<sup>7</sup> forms of existence, all the declarations of principle notwithstanding. The exceptions concern individuals who are censured and oppressed by the security organs and the organs of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: men and women who are Marxists, but can't call themselves Marxists without risking sanctions and internment in the camps.

Marxism is also absent from these theoretical forms of existence in the Western Communist Parties. It isn't completely absent from these theoretical forms of existence<sup>8</sup>; there are, in these parties, a few elements that are still alive. Often, however, Marxism is, in the West, alive outside the Communist Parties (among ex-Communists or communists "without a party").

The upshot of this analysis is as follows. Apart from exceptions that should be studied in detail, Marxism is absent *in* its forms of existence. In other words, it is in fact absent in the

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<sup>4</sup> Here "politiques" is in the plural, at least in my transcription, indicating that it modifies "formes." Translator.

<sup>5</sup> Here "idéologiques" is in the plural, at least in my transcription, indicating that it modifies "formes." Translator.

<sup>6</sup> Here "théorique" is in the singular, at least in my transcription, indicating that it modifies "existence." I've put it in the plural. Translator.

<sup>7</sup> Here "théoriques" is in the plural, at least in my transcription, indicating that it modifies "formes." Translator.

<sup>8</sup> Two occurrences of "théorique" in the singular in this sentence. I've added an s. Translator.

apparent forms of its presence. In the Soviet Union, the whole political apparatus speaks the language of Marx and Lenin. This is pure semblance; behind this semblance, living Marxism is absent. The same thing holds, with obvious differences and nuances, for the Western Communist Parties.

*Fifth.* If Marxism is absent, it must have been replaced by something else, since a place never remains empty. It has been replaced by the active, very active, very powerful presence of something different: by *bourgeois* economic, political, ideological, and theoretical practice. *Economic* practice: the essence of economic practice is exploitation. Exploitation continues to exist in the Soviet Union. The essence of bourgeois *political* practice is to arrange for its objectives to be accomplished by the subjects subjected [*soumis*] to it. This practice is completely dominant in the Soviet Union and is, to a large extent, dominant in the Western Communist Parties too. Marxism has also been replaced by bourgeois ideology. The matter is clear as far as the USSR is concerned. It is also quite clear in the case of the Western Communist Parties. In the Soviet Union, under the mantle of Marxist terminology, bourgeois ideology reigns undisputed over the social formation. In the Western Communist Parties, bourgeois ideology is dominant to a very large extent; it comes into contradiction with the resistance put up by the Communists who try to fight it. As for *theory*, the last item on my list, the theory that reigns in the socialist countries has very little in common with living Marxism. The situation is better in the Western Communist Parties, but that doesn't get us very far. In place of Marxist theory, bourgeois theories reign supreme. It's very easy to marshal the evidence to prove it.

Everything I've just explained is nothing other than a historical result. It is this historical result which allows us to affirm the existence of the crisis of Marxism today. This historical result allows a communist – whether he's Dutch, French, or Italian hardly matters – to speak freely about the crisis of Marxism, in other words, to talk about it publicly without being censured by his own party. And this is easy to understand, for, with the exception of the countries in the East, the Communist Parties have neglected or abandoned Marxism (or are on the way to abandoning it, as they are abandoning the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat), or have already forgotten Marxism. Under these conditions, in any case, there is no longer any serious relationship with Marxism. My own party can't censure me for talking about the crisis of Marxism because it no longer knows very well itself what the word Marxism means. This historical result is one result of a long process.

The essential question accordingly becomes: *When did this long process begin?* For we in fact find ourselves confronting ideologues who claim that Marxism has always been in crisis, for the very simple reason that Marx's theory is "wrong." According to them, it was the confrontation of Marx's theory with reality that precipitated a state of crisis. Under these conditions, we have to ask ourselves *at what point in time* this process of the constitution of the crisis began. Some say the crisis goes back to Stalin; others say, to Lenin; still others say, to Marx himself.

"To Marx himself" not in the sense in which I just spoke of the crisis, but to Marx as the author of a theory that claimed to be true, but contains errors.

I shall say that all these commentators are right. When we try to verify that, we'll see that they're wrong.

Marx himself never stopped being in crisis. He acknowledged this himself by declaring: "I am not a Marxist." That's one way of overtly declaring an absence. Marx, however, can't be compared to a socialist state or a Communist Party. Marx wrote *Capital* over a period of fifteen years in the British Museum, alone in front of his book, which he had on his desk. But he also had the *Communist Manifesto* on his mind, and the 1848 revolution, the tragic 1848 revolution, the strength of the proletarian movement and the bourgeoisie's massacre of the proletariat. So it is truly not to be taken seriously when someone comes along and says that Marx was in crisis and that that explains why Marxism is in crisis.

There are also people who say the crisis goes back to Lenin. They seem to have better justification. Their reasons for saying so don't have all that much to do with the forms in which Lenin discussed the organization of the communist party in *What is to Be Done?*, since Lenin himself explained, looking back,<sup>9</sup> that these forms were forms indispensable to clandestine struggle, and that the ideology he defended in *What is to Be Done?* was part of a battle against the economism characteristic of a certain period. Those who think the crisis goes back to Lenin, those who defend this hypothesis, evoke, for example, Lenin's creation of the Third International, which was bound up with his idea of the course historical events would take, of the imminence of revolutions in Western Europe and the Russian Revolution's vital need for support from Western revolutions. Others talk about the "Twenty-One Conditions" as well.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Vladimir Lenin, *Twelve Years*, in Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 13, pp. 101ff.

<sup>10</sup> The Twenty-One Conditions of admission to the Third International, drawn up by Lenin, were adopted at the International's Second Congress on 30 July 1920. *Second Congress of the Communist International: Minutes of the*

I think we have to be extremely careful, because, in this precise case, we're dealing with a very delicate matter. If we think of the Third International founded by Lenin, it doubtless is true that it gave rise to the Twenty-One Conditions, put forward so that communist parties in Western Europe would emerge from splits with the social democrats. The Third International, however, didn't necessarily entail what is known as "Bolshevization." "Bolshevization" was a process in which the Western Communist Parties were called upon to adopt the clandestine Bolshevik party's organizational forms. On the basis of the current state of our knowledge and the current state of research, it seems possible to say that if any one element had political consequences in this extremely difficult, dramatic period, it was the decision to "bolshevize" the Communist Parties. Stalin made this decision in 1925, fifteen months after Lenin's death, and it was in fact eventually applied, with great difficulty, to all the Communist Parties in the world, hence to the Western Communist Parties as well.

When one finds oneself in a historical situation, one has, in order to judge whether the crisis resulted from this or that element, to carefully weigh up all the elements. Not only does one have to weigh up the pros and cons of the creation of the Third International, Lenin's policy vis-à-vis the peasants, and so on; one also has to weigh up the pros and cons of Lenin's policy vis-à-vis Taylorism. Someone has tried to make this theoretical and historical judgement, which it is very hard to do. I'm alluding to Robert Linhart's book on Lenin, the peasants, and Taylorism,<sup>11</sup> an important book from this standpoint. Why have I said all this? Because we have to be on our guard against fictive genealogies which, taking the standpoint of a historical result *obtained later*, after the history that they describe, set out from this premise and, accordingly, think this result as inevitable, hence as fated to occur from all time. I believe that, in order to understand current history, living history, we have to avoid anticipating its result. On the contrary, we have constantly to compare the objective constraints weighing on a situation with the measures taken by political leaders. In other words, we have to put ourselves back in the conditions of the period in order to see what could and couldn't be done. We have to perform this labor of historical intellectual research in the knowledge that no measure, however correct, can guarantee that the solution that that measure applies to the questions of the day will be

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*Proceedings*, vol. 1, New York, New Park Publications, 1977, p, 303. Available on line at <https://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch07.htm#v1-p303>

<sup>11</sup> Robert Linhart, *Lénine, les paysans, Taylor: Essai d'analyse historique matérialiste de la naissance du système productif*



exhaustive and without gaps [*sans failles*]. On the contrary, we have to try to discover the gaps in every political measure in order to understand how later history may lodge itself in them with a view to closing them, and so end up occupying social space in its entirety.

I shall take two contradictory examples to illustrate what I mean. First, Lenin's creation of the Third International. The relation between the creation of the Third International and the Twenty-One Conditions is a relation of cause and effect [*de conséquence*], a relation without gaps. In contrast, the relation between the Third International founded by Lenin and the "Bolshevization" decreed and carried out by Stalin contains a gap. There can be, and there are, gaps in some of the measures taken by Lenin; but what exists in these gaps doesn't necessarily stem from Lenin. It's something else that isn't Lenin's, but that has exploited those gaps in order to lodge itself in them and end up occupying social space in its entirety. I say this as a warning against logical errors in history and historical errors in logic. In both cases, the essential thing is what Marx says in the Introduction to the *Contribution*:<sup>12</sup> it is the differences which are decisive. Thus there is a continuity in history, which, however, involves gaps, involves the possibility of discontinuity. Thus there is a continuity that entails possibilities, but has nothing inevitable about it.

I had to go into all these details with respect to Lenin because all the problems of historical interpretation in Marxism can come into play here as they do elsewhere. This is one example among others, but these examples are very important when it comes to understanding the crisis of Marxism.

I shall now consider a third thesis: that the beginning of the crisis dates from Stalin. I put it as a question: Did the process of the beginning of the crisis date from Stalin? And I answer right away that it didn't. The individual named Stalin, Secretary of the Bolshevik Party from 1923, after Lenin's death, until 1929,<sup>13</sup> cannot be regarded as the origin of the crisis. One can even say just the opposite; one can argue that, in the period 1923-1929, the Soviet Union and

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*soviétique*, Paris, Seuil, 1976.

<sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, Introduction to the *Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ernst Wangermann, *MECW* 28. Althusser probably has the following sentence in mind: "The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape. On the other hand, indications of higher forms in the lower species of animals can only be understood when the higher forms themselves are known" (p. 42). See Althusser, *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings*, ed. François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian, London, Verso, 2003, p. 285 ff.

<sup>13</sup> Lenin had a severe stroke in March 1923 and died in January 1924. Stalin was General Secretary of the CPSU from May 1922 until his death in 1953.

Marxism enjoyed an unprecedented flowering. This was the period of the New Economic Policy in the Soviet Union, of the flowering of Marxism in the Soviet Union and also in the Western countries, where it was coming to be better known. In the Soviet Union, extraordinarily intense debates over theoretical questions of Marxism occurred in this period. It cannot be said that Marxism was in crisis anywhere in the world. On the contrary, it was very much alive, a few troubling signs notwithstanding. The international communist movement, for example, remained united and vibrant, despite grave mistakes. There were difficulties, which were sometimes serious, but there was no question of a crisis of Marxism at the time. At the other end of the world, the Chinese Revolution was already underway. In our Western world, the Popular Fronts were setting out, touching off a movement without precedent, and the Spanish Republicans were fighting fascism in a war they might well have won. The whole period, the 1930s, was one in which no one knew the course things would take, whether the period would veer toward death or rebirth, defeat or victory.

This uncertainty could of course be characterized as a *sign* of the crisis of Marxism in the sense in which crisis, as I said, also signifies uncertainty. But uncertainty isn't death; it isn't the fatal crisis. For my part, I would say – this is a hypothesis – that the crisis of Marxism doesn't date from Stalin; *it dates from Stalinism*, which isn't the same thing. The crisis of Marxism began building, in undeclared fashion, from 1929-1930 on, that is, the years of forced collectivization of the land in the Soviet Union. Starting then, a gigantic, contradictory process was set in motion, one that would culminate in the crisis of Marxism: an immense, contradictory process, in which we can single out the big 1937-1938 trials of the Bolshevik leaders on the one hand, but, at the same time, the Seventh Congress of the International,<sup>14</sup> at which Dimitrov secured the adoption of a Popular Front strategy to seal anti-fascist unity and, simultaneously, the (successful) defense of the Soviet Union, which culminated at Stalingrad and later helped ensure the liberation of the peoples of Europe. All this is contradictory. For, at the same time, the Soviet Union would go to Yalta, and would soon let English troops crush the Greek resistance. Thereafter, in the Cold War period, it would let the Communists seize power in the popular democracies<sup>15</sup> by eliminating all the other men of the Left. After the war, big trials would again

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<sup>14</sup> The Seventh Congress of the Communist International was held in Moscow in summer 1935.

<sup>15</sup> There are no inverted commas in the original, at least in my transcription of it. Translator.

occur everywhere, in Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania – the “popular democracies.”<sup>16</sup> And behind all these phenomena, peaking after war’s end, would be the systematic creation of a gigantic network of concentration camps in the Soviet Union. Stalinism was constituted at this time as the historic result of this whole process.

We have to try to give a definition of Stalinism. What is Stalinism?

I shall try to answer by saying that Stalinism is a very precise way of transforming Marxism, which is the theory and ideology of the working class, into a theory and ideology of a bourgeois kind. It isn’t a question of importing bourgeois ideology into the Soviet Union directly, the way one imports merchandise, finished products. It’s a question of transforming Marxism into an ideology of a bourgeois kind on the basis of Marxism itself. It’s a question of a very precise way of ridding oneself of Marxism by using it in a very precise way. How? By transforming it, distorting it, turning it into a theory, an ideology, and a practice of a bourgeois kind.

If, now, we go into Stalinism in detail, we can, I think, say something like the following: Stalinism is a total system, a whole, which establishes a systematic, coherent relationship among all its elements, from the most abstract theory to the most concrete practice. The procedure that Stalinism employs to obtain this result is *the procedure of reduction*. I shall provide a few concrete examples of it.

*In theory*, to begin with. Stalinism reduces historical materialism to dialectical materialism. It reduces dialectical materialism to a philosophy of history and, simultaneously, to a positivist philosophy. The whole set of these transformations, which are reductions, culminates in what is called dogmatism. Similarly—I’m still talking about theory—Stalinism reduces, within historical materialism, the relations of production to the productive forces, and the productive forces to the instruments of production. Similarly, within historical materialism, Stalinism reduces the class character of the state to nothing at all. You know the famous sentence: “The state is the state of the whole people in the Soviet Union.”

As far as *ideology* is concerned, Stalinism reduces Marxist ideology to the ideology of the Bolshevik Party and, ultimately, reduces the ideology of the Party to fear, terror, and the camps, while simultaneously reducing the ideology of Marxism to the ideology of “the new man.” The

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<sup>16</sup> Inverted commas in the original, at least in my transcription of it. Translator.

ideology of “the new man” corresponds to an ideology that the members of the Communist Party need in order to accomplish what the Party requires of them. Stalinism reduces communism to socialism. Stalinism reduces ideology in the class struggle to economism and moralism, or humanism.

In the realm of *politics*, things can perhaps be grasped more concretely. Stalinism reduces the international class struggle to *Realpolitik*; it is no accident that both the dissolution of the Third International and the Yalta Conference belong to the same historical period. In the realm of politics, Stalinism reduces the class struggle to the repression of mass struggles, distorting it. Stalinism reduces labor unions to the party’s “transmission belts.” Stalinism reduces the party to the state. Stalinism reduces the masses to the party, the party to the state, and the state to its leader, whose cult it organizes.

In the *economic* field, Stalinism reduces the relations of production to productive forces, and the productive forces to the instruments of production; that is, it completely neglects the workers, who are part of the productive forces, and has a *technical* conception of them. Stalinism reduces production to circulation, contrary to what Marx showed. Stalinism reduces human labor-power, that is, the worker, to a strange condition in which he becomes the Stakhanovite, that is, a human being reduced to the state of a mechanism that indefinitely exhausts itself, or to what Stalin would call “the engineer of souls.” In any case, one never leaves machines, technology, or the world of the engineer behind.

In sum, I would say that it is characteristic of Stalinism to make Marxism disappear beneath a verbal evocation of Marxism and an invocation of Marxism. What I have just described is the *closed* crisis of Marxism, its *blocked, asphyxiated, repressed* crisis. Why? Because the crisis isn’t declared. On the contrary: one declares that there is no crisis, and one does so in the language of Marxism itself. Involved here are words in place of concepts. All of us, communists and non-communists alike, have lived under the domination of this closed crisis, this blocked crisis, from the 1930s to the Soviet Union’s Twentieth Congress, where the crisis erupted, yet was still masked. For it was only later that it developed to the point of *being declared and becoming overt*. We can rapidly identify the essential moments of this process. The Soviet Communist Party’s crisis was marked by the Twentieth Congress. Thereafter, the Soviet intervention in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 accentuated the international communist movement’s crisis. Thus the Soviet Communist Party’s crisis touched off, in a chain reaction, a

crisis in the international communist movement. In this perspective, the essential moments of this process were the 1956 invasion of Hungary, the 1967 Sino-Soviet split, the 1968 intervention in Czechoslovakia, and the 1976 Conference of Berlin, which declared in its final communiqué that there would be no more conferences. . .<sup>17</sup> The third moment in the development of the crisis of Marxism emerged with the crisis of the Western Communist Parties, basically in Italy and France.

The most recent elections<sup>18</sup> and, beyond the elections, the situation of the Communist Parties in Italy and France show that events, that is, the class struggle, have seriously challenged the Italian Communist Party's [and French Communist Party's] political line, or are seriously challenging or will seriously challenge, as you like, the Italian Communist Party's and the French Communist Party's political line.

I'm not going to go into the details of recent events in either the French Communist Party or the Italian Communist Party. I would like to sum up the Western Communist Parties' situation by saying that we are witnessing the end of the recognized forms of Marxist political theory and practice, and their replacement by bourgeois theoretical and ideological forms, as well as by a bourgeois practice of politics.

The question that arises for us today is the following: If Marxism is indeed going through such a serious, profound crisis, does this mean that the workers' movement is in crisis? Does it mean that imperialism has triumphed? Does it mean the end of Marxism? To all these questions, my own answer is no. I would say that, despite the crushing domination of imperialism and of local bourgeoisies (all of which depend on imperialism's global system), and despite the big victories that imperialism has won over working-class organizations, there exist

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<sup>17</sup> The Berlin Conference of twenty-nine communist and workers' parties did not declare in its final communiqué (*Neues Deutschland*, 31/155, 1 July 1976, pp. 3-4) that there would be no more conferences. The French, Spanish and Italian PCs did, however, make it known that they saw no further need for them.

<sup>18</sup> The Union of the Left, an electoral alliance of the French Communist Party, Mitterrand's Socialists, and a small center-left party, the Left Radicals, fell apart amid mutual incrimination in September 1977. Although it was patched back together between the two rounds of the March 1978 legislative elections, the Left lost those elections, which it had been widely expected to carry. Late in April, Althusser published, in *Le Monde*, a four-part article sharply critical of the PCF and its role in the electoral defeat. An expanded, revised version of this article appeared in May: *Ce qui ne peut plus durer dans le parti communiste*, Paris, Maspero, 1978. Only the newspaper version has been translated into English: "What Must Change in the Party," trans. Patrick Camiller, *New Left Review*, no. 109, May-June 1978, pp. 19-45.

In the wake of the Red Brigades' March kidnapping and 9 May 1978 murder of Aldo Moro, former Italian prime minister and president of Italy's ruling Christian Democratic Party, the PCI suffered significant losses in a number of local elections held on 15 May.

tremendous strengths in the workers' and mass movements of the imperialist countries and in the liberation movement of the Third World countries. Under these conditions, the class struggle has developed, culminating in the following result: *the crisis is now acknowledged, overt, that is to say, it is in full view of everyone; and it is declared, that is to say, we can talk about it*. We can talk about the crisis as such, as an objective reality. I would say: At last the crisis has erupted! At last it is overt, at last it is declared, at last we can declare it, at last we can think about it, because it exists, because we can all see it and because we can all name it. And I would say that *this is the first time in the history of the Marxist workers' movement* that this has occurred; and perhaps, to the extent that the Marxist workers' movement has represented the avant-garde of the workers' movement *tout court*, this is perhaps the first time in the history of the workers' movement as a whole.

If this is so, it is at last possible to *free ourselves* from Stalinism's theoretical, political, and ideological impostures, and to establish new theoretical relations with Marxist theory and new political relations with the popular masses. If it really is possible for us to forge this bond, this unity between Marxist theory and the popular masses, then what lies before us is truly the rebirth, the beginnings of a rebirth of Marxism.

The rebirth of Marxism can mean only one thing: its transformation. If one thinks about the phenomenon we're discussing today, one can say it is a phenomenon without precedent in Western history since the Reformation. Similarly, the situation in the workers' movement is without precedent in the entire history of the workers' movement. The situation has never been organized this way, it has never been structured this way. Imperialism's domination over the workers' movement throughout the world is more overwhelming than ever. And, in the West, the workers' movement has never known anything but defeats, from the 1848 revolutions, which were crushed amid bloody massacres, down to the most recent elections in France and Italy, which are defeats. The Commune, too, was bloodily crushed. But there was a French song after the Commune, there were many songs in France after the Commune; a father sang to his little boy, "No, Nicolas, the Commune isn't dead."<sup>19</sup> We too can say that, even today, as we note "the grave crisis of Marxism," but not "the grave crisis of the workers' movement." Today, we note the strength of the workers' movement and, simultaneously, the crisis of Marxism, that

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<sup>19</sup> The lyrics to the song "Elle n'est pas morte" are based on an 1886 poem by Eugène Pottier, who also wrote, as the Commune was going down to defeat, the poem that became the lyrics to the *Internationale*.

is, the crisis of the ideology of the workers' movement. Today, we are in the following situation: the workers' movement, with all its contradictions, all its defeats, harbors great historical capacities, whose measure we have yet to take – historical capacities that have often, sometimes tragically, been neglected by the Communist parties. This workers' movement whose powers are unknown to us<sup>20</sup> – and by that I mean that we don't know what it is capable of doing, since it does only what its organizations allow it to do – this enormous reserve of power has a potential that it is hard to discern or know in advance. And, on top of everything else, we have this little thing that is appreciable, yet, relatively, less important than the workers' movement. This little thing is the crisis of Marxism. It is the crisis of the ideology of the workers' movement. The workers' movement has an ideology that is in crisis: there we have the present situation. We can know the workers' movement, we can know its ideology, and we can learn why it is in a crisis. The relation of forces isn't favorable to the ideology of the workers' movement. Of course, imperialism is made stronger by the crisis of the ideology of the workers' movement. But if we can arrive at exact knowledge of this crisis, if we can unleash the forces it contains – the ideological and theoretical forces – and if we can put these forces at the service of the workers' movement and at the service of the popular masses, then the game isn't over yet. I shall say that that is our sole hope in the world we live in; but it is an immense hope. And it is here that I shall evoke Hegel's image of the rising sun. That is what the crisis of Marxism is. Will the sun rise tomorrow? That was Hume's question. Hegel said that the sunrise is the birth of a historical period. For us communists, it is enough to say: "tomorrow is another day."<sup>21</sup>

*Translated by G. M. Goshgarian*

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<sup>20</sup> The phrase echoes what Spinoza says of the body's unknown capacities in Part 3 of the *Ethics*.

<sup>21</sup> The last words of the text, "demain il fera jour," might also be translated "tomorrow will bring the dawn."