Introduction to Part 1

Materialist social histories abounded in the 1970s, which is not to suggest that all of this work was Marxist. That said, cavalier dismissal of Marxism within social-history circles (of the kind that has come, sadly, to be all too common) was distinctly out of fashion. There was a sense that Marxism and historical practice were certainly congruent undertakings. In the 1980s, however, there was a change in this climate of tolerance, even possibly acceptance and acknowledgement of Marxism’s contribution to the production of invaluable materialist accounts of the past. Specific factors contributed to the changing relationship of Marxism and historical practice, with the fortunes of historical materialism in definite decline.

The generalised climate of radicalism associated with the 1960s, through which many historians apprenticing in Marxism of one kind or another passed throughout the early to mid-1970s, gave way to an entirely different political sensibility. In the political economies and cultural cauldrons of the advanced capitalist West, the revival of class struggle and the promise of socialist possibility that had dawned in youthful mobilisations of workplace militancy and street protests waned. Nineteen sixty-eight and its slogans of defiance gave way, by 1978 and certainly by 1988, to a less bellicose and challenging context. Capitalism’s apparent victories trumped the momentum of left-wing, class-based, alternative-ordered challenge.

These triumphs registered not only over capitalism’s global adversary, Soviet communism, but also over its domestic critics. The 1980s dawned with the Solidarność upheaval in Poland, which prefigured the eventual implosion of the Soviet Union and its hegemonic hold over the Iron Curtain ‘socialism’ of Eastern and Central Europe. In the United States and the United Kingdom, the fortunes of class war, which showed signs of significant revival in the late 1960s and early to mid-1970s, witnessed a turning of the tide. Miners’ strikes in 1972 and 1974 contributed, along with shop-steward militancy in the auto sector, to the collapse of the Tory government of Edward Heath, creating the possibility of the Labour Party coming to power under the admittedly tepid social-democratic leadership of Harold Wilson. Since the mid-1960s young workers in the Fordist vanguard of American production in auto plants in Lordstown, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan, had been charting a course of resistance fed by alienation and overt class anger. But the 1980s opened in the United States with Ronald Reagan’s declaration of war against the labour movement, decisively sounded in his 1981 defeat of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization, and the blue-collar blues and Leagues of Revolutionary Black Workers
that had seemedpivotallyimportantinthe late1960sandearly1970swere all-too-distantmemories. Reagan’sBritishequivalent,MargaretThatcher,was not abouttorepeatHeath’sdanceofdeathwiththeminers:shebattledthisseem-
inglyarchaicclassenemyintothegroundofthebarrencoalfieldsin1984 strike that proved to be the colliers’ last stand.

As this class war waged from above took its toll, the entire political spec-
trum shifted to the right. The drive to a new ideological consensus, gather-
ingmomentumasa revanchistconservatism, rebranded itself‘neoliberalism’;
components of it were disciplining and domesticating the unions, marginal-
ising the left, and proclaiming a final and unambiguous routing of what passed
for communism. This was more easily done than at any previous time in his-
tory, because the contradictory internal dynamic of ‘actually existing socialism’
was tending towards implosion. This is precisely what happened in the Soviet
sphere, when the political caste that stood astride the social order opted to
try to ‘reform’ the ossified structures of production and governance simultan-
eously, unleashing too many demons for even the rigid Stalinist apparatus to
contain. The result was an unpredictably precipitous implosion of the old order
and a chaotic descent into capitalist barbarism, in which new hordes of profit
seekers pillaged the socialised property forms of what had once contained
some semblances of a workers’ state. In the ensuing dismantling of popular pro-
tections, the primitive accumulation of new class formations took on the trapp-
ings of a disorderly frontier of acquisitive individualism. Socialism seemed a
historical impossibility. In China, the market’s incursions into the rigidities of
a mechanically planned economy that allowed no leeway for workers’ control
were more managed and less rapacious because the state refused to concede
democratisation of politics. It retained its capacity to suppress dissent and to
cultivate or coerce conformity. As this reached its violent apex with the 1989
suppression of student protests in Tiananmen Square, Stalinism’s capacity to
present itself as progressive took yet another nose dive.

For many New Left-influenced historians, reared on the 1960s belief that the
old left was dying and that revolutionary possibility could be rekindled in new
mobilisations and a politics of participatory democracy, Marxism could not
survive this 1980s onslaught. Too much blood had now passed under the bridge
that supposedly connected workers, as Marx’s gravediggers of capitalism, and
their past struggles to a better future.

Looking back on the becalmed protest possibilities of the 1960s, the jaded
realities of the 1970s, and the hard defeats of the 1980s, a generation of social his-
torians whose original interests lay in exploring the histories and possibilities of
class and its struggles retreated politically. They were increasingly drawn to new
ways of seeing the world. Through aging eyes, these interpretive innovations