

First as Tragedy, Then as Farce

How Marx Predicted the Fate of Marxism

By [Michael Rectenwald](#) (January 2019)



Kill the Resisters, Jiang Feng, 1931

A few months ago, I was surprised and disappointed to learn that Marx's famous statement, the title of this essay and a rejoinder to Hegel's supposed remark—"that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice"—had been appropriated by the contemporary Slovenian Marxist and psychoanalytic theorist Slavoj Žižek, for the title of one of his books. I was disappointed because I had considered using the title myself. I was surprised because, not having read

Žižek's entire oeuvre, I hadn't known of his appropriation. Further, quite apart from my own intended (and past casual) use, I was astonished to see how unselfconscious and lacking in intentional irony Žižek had been in naming a book about capitalism [*First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*](#) (2009). I've used the phrase quite differently on social media: "Marx(ism): First as tragedy, then as farce"—crediting Marx for his profundity and ironically applying his observation to Marxism itself in a boomeranging way that Marx could have hardly hoped for or expected. But if this statement aptly applies to the repetition of any world-historic fact, it applies to Marxism itself.

The tragedy of Marxism has been well-documented, and despite the obstinate denial of contemporary Marxists, some of whom ludicrously hold the conspiracy theory that the documentation of historical facts amounts to "capitalist propaganda," the evidence speaks for itself, for an epochal and epic tragedy, a tragedy unmatched by any other ideologically-induced horror in human history. And the rebounding [contemporary popularity](#) of socialism-communism is certainly farcical, mostly representing [LARPing](#) by theoretical and activist posers but more so the stunning historical and political illiteracy that such posturing betrays.

Yet just over two years ago, I was a theoretical Marxist LARPer myself, I suppose. I wasn't a Stalinist or [tankie](#), and thus didn't deny the history of Soviet, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Cambodian, and Cuban atrocities. In the case of the USSR at least, I believed that the nightmare had been the result of the usurpation of a potentially social-communist revolution by the Bolsheviks, whose conniving party leaders became dictatorial state leaders. In the case of China, it was a "bourgeois revolution with red flags." Mao's revolutionary

army hadn't consisted of the working class, which had already been decimated, but rather an amalgam of peasants and assorted "petty bourgeois" radicals with no material interest in the working-class control of society. In all cases of "actually-existing" socialism-communism, the Marxist project had been utterly foiled, or merely mimed and maimed by frauds posing as Marxists. The resultant dire consequences could and would be averted in a truly socialist-communist society of the future.

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"But still, how could you have been communist," you may ask, "especially after the twentieth century?" Despite the accumulation of corpses, strangely enough, the answer is the same as it had been at the inception of Marxist communism. It is the same answer as the answer that could be given to the question, "What does it mean to be a Communist?"

I've only recently found the best answer I've seen yet—in a book referenced by Daniel Mallock in "[Driven to Despair: The Return of American Socialism](#)," an important essay published in last month's *NER*. The book is *Witness* by Whittaker Chambers, the 1952 classic tale of a former communist who "broke"—with the party and communism itself.

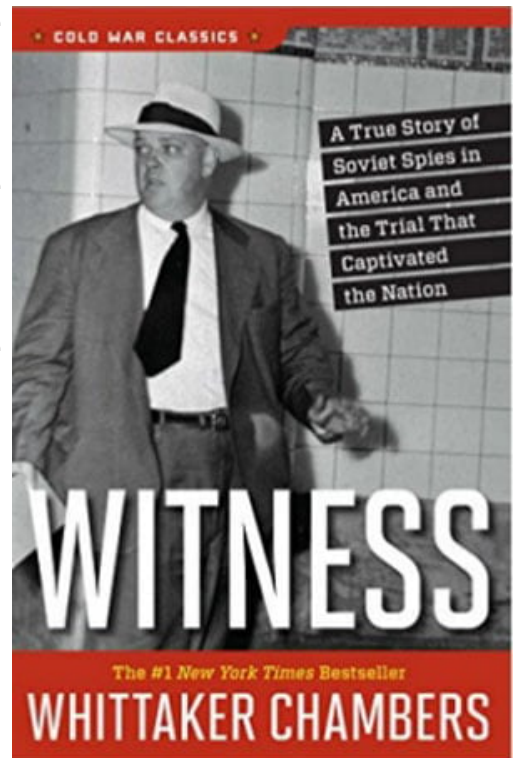
A communist, Chambers held, is not merely (or necessarily) a believer in dialectical materialism, the labor theory of value, the dictatorship of the proletariat, or even the

utopian promise of universal human emancipation. The basis of communism is not found in the dare and promise of the final three sentences of the Communist Manifesto of 1848: "Workers of the world, unite. You have nothing to lose but your chains. You have a world to gain."

Rather, a true communist is one who has examined a long-historical and still presently dysfunctional world, probably more negatively than most, and has arrived at the conviction that its rational and total remaking is both necessary and possible. Without yet giving away his eventual and ultimate objection to communism, I quote the germ of the communist creed as Chambers saw it, which I agree is its fundamental premise and claim:

It is the vision of man's liberated mind, by the sole force of its rational intelligence, redirecting man's destiny and reorganizing man's life and the world . . .

It challenges him to prove it [the centrality and capacity of rationality] by using the force of his rational mind to end the bloody meaninglessness of man's history—by giving it purpose and a plan. It challenges him to prove it by reducing the meaningless chaos of nature, by imposing on it his rational will to order, abundance, security, peace. It is the vision of materialism . . .



Communism does not summon men to crime or to Utopia, as its easy critics like to think. On the plane of faith, it summons mankind to turn its vision into practical reality. On the plane of action, it summons men to struggle against the inertia of the past which, embodied in social, political and economic forms, Communism claims, is blocking the will of mankind to make its next great forward stride. It summons men to overcome the crisis, which, Communism claims, is in effect a crisis of rending frustration, with the world, unable to stand still, but unwilling to go forward along the road that the logic of a technological civilization points out—Communism.

This is Communism's moral sanction, which is twofold. Its vision points the way to the future; its faith labors to turn the future into present reality. It says to every man who joins it: the vision is a practical problem of history; the way to achieve it is a practical problem of politics, which is the present tense of history. Have you

the moral strength to take upon yourself the crimes of history so that man at last may close his chronicle of age-old, senseless suffering, and replace it with purpose and a plan? The answer a man makes to this question is the difference between the Communist and those miscellaneous socialists, liberals, fellow travelers, unclassified progressives and men of good will, all of whom share a similar vision, but do not share the faith because they will not take upon themselves the penalties of the faith. The answer is the root of that sense of moral superiority which makes Communists, though caught in crime, berate their opponents with withering self-righteousness. (Chambers, Whittaker. *Witness* (Cold War Classics). Regnery History. Kindle Edition.)

It is this faith in the centrality and capacity of human rationality and will, effectively embodied in science and technology, and in scientific theory—of which Marxism claims to be the social scientific representative—that makes a belief in communism possible and that allows the communist to undertake, excuse, and/or deny a host of crimes committed against humanity in its name.

That being said, what brings a communist to “break” with it? How does the communist escape this “