Given the title and subject of McLellan’s well-known introduction, we believe it is incumbent on us to draw attention to the major differences between our two volumes. McLellan’s *Marxism after Marx* provides scholarly coverage of a complex field written by a very good Marxist academician in the British tradition. Our book is fundamentally engaged with the history of Marxist political practice and the ideas that permeate and define that practice. In this engagement, we separate this history from the dominant interest in political economy, the more putatively scientific side of Marxism. Our focus addresses what has been the best of the revolutionary impetus of Marxism in the twentieth century through which there exists a history of significant, albeit truncated, socialist development. In contrast, McLellan’s book summarizes and reflects upon numerous strands of Marxism well beyond the revolutionary; for example, he addresses the important work of Gramsci, the turn to ideological and superstructural analysis by Lukacs and the Frankfurt School, as well as Sartre, Althusser, and others. They all addressed problems of Marxist theory and political economy and sometimes politics in an era when the Western proletariat appeared to have lost its revolutionary potential. Much of this theorizing is unrelated to actual struggles and was undertaken in isolation from political practice and from the working class, although any theory claiming to be Marxist has implications for practice, whether beneficial or harmful. We also discuss the relationship between Marxism and feminist politics because addressing the particular oppression of women is a fundamental issue in Marxist theory. Finally, we raise the tactical question of the place of socialist politics in the context of the deep ecological crisis that is global in scope.

We are in general agreement with McLellan on several key points about Marx’s original work, and in *Marxism after Marx* he identifies four main “fields” of analysis. In economics, only later Marxists expanded Marx’s original analysis of competitive capitalism into the complexities of monopoly and imperialism. Sociologically, Marx’s analysis of classes in modern society was not fully developed, and this judgment is particularly true with respect to his understanding of non-European peasantry (p. 3). These points are well-known.

Philosophically, as a product of the nineteenth-century, Marxism was easily moulded into a Newtonian science of society, a positivist body of principles and laws which were seen as determinations rather than as merely tendential probabilities subject to exceptions, errors, and contingencies. McLellan blames Engels for transforming Marx’s materialism into a replication of outmoded natural science by utilizing a biological and evolutionary foundation for historical change (pp. 10-15), although we believe that positivism is often explicit in Marx’s mature theory. (We find, in addition, that there is much that is positivist in Lenin.) As the most important mentor of the growing Marxist political movement between 1883 and 1895, Engels sought to provide some secure philosophical foundation for the fundamental principles of “the dialectical method and … the communist world outlook” (p. 10).

The problem of positivism connects directly with the fourth field McLellan identifies and the subject of our book: politics. Positivism, he argues, converts Marxism into a body of “scientific” orthodoxy termed “dialectical materialism,” which became a dogmatic, congealed ideological “truth” no longer open to the dialectics of change through reiterations of theory and practice. Such a rigid and simplified orthodoxy reflects “an ever-growing distance from the original ideas of Marx.” The corollary of dogmatism, McLellan says, is labelling dissenting

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views “heresy (or revisionism, as it was often called)” (p. 2). Revisionism was a label applied to evolutionary socialism by revolutionaries such as Luxemburg and Lenin long before Leninism became the official ideology of the USSR. The term is seldom used in contemporary Marxism because of its opportunistic usage in the USSR and elsewhere, and McLellan follows this practice of avoidance in his discussion of the “revisionist controversy.” But, overall, he is critical of this political tendency. He notes the counter-revolutionary outcome of social democratic politics in Germany, climaxed by the murder of Luxemburg and Liebknecht. We argue, further, that reformism in the Marxist movement has evolved from social democratic Revisionism to become one of the principal foundations of capitalist globalization. As with positivist distortions, McLellan locates early support for evolutionary social democracy and parliamentary reform as a putative path to socialism back to Engels, who warned about the loss of momentum towards the progressive evolutionary future caused by “‘vanguard skirmishes’” (p. 16). McLellan concludes that both Revisionism and “ossified Marxism” (Stalinism) are mirrors of each other and, in both cases, “vestiges of Marxism become increasingly difficult to find” (pp. 38, 58).

In the key field of politics, Marx never completed his theory of the state, and his references to political action are few, confined mostly to the historical analyses of revolutionary moments and their aftermath (1848, the Paris Commune), which by no means followed the typical script of a movement led by a class conscious proletariat. McLellan says that “Marx had not had to deal with the problem of the relationship between leadership, party and masses” (p. 4) – precisely the problem of revolutionary politics. On the other hand, we argue that in Marx’s long battle with anarchism he had to deal with one form of misleadership, and in his critique of the Gotha Programme, he critiqued reformist politics. From McLellan’s point of view, any kind of politics, from Leninism to libertarian socialism – but not “Stalinism” – can plausibly claim to be derived from Marx. In our view, however, the fundamental point is less whether a movement or policy claims to have been derived from Marx’s texts and more whether the version of Marxism after Marx contributes to the political, economic, and social transition to socialism. If it does not, as in social democracy in the twentieth century, at best it is Revisionism developing away from socialism; at worst, it has surrendered to capitalism. Revisionism is applicable only in cases in which the political movement in question continues to claim a Marxist orientation.

The fundamental issue in the history of Marxism after Marx, in our view, is the question of Lenin. A fundamental critique of the Leninist model of revolution is that it has become overly authoritarian and it has failed, and where it has not yet collapsed, for example in Cuba, its days are numbered. We take these problems seriously, but rather than discard the theory in toto, we argue it is necessary to learn from this almost century-long history—2017 is the centenary of the Bolshevik Revolution—to assess its weaknesses and learn from its experiments. We find that the two primary alternatives are more problematic. The successes of anarchism in actually constructing an alternative to capitalism have significantly shorter histories and, we argue, fail congenitally. As far as reformist social democracy is concerned, its much greater political success is actually a measure of its long-term failure to convert capitalism to socialism—in fact, it does a better job of doing precisely the opposite.

For McLellan, once the doctrine of Leninism had been congealed into final form by Stalin, Marxism was taken down a dead-end path leading inevitably to tyranny. McLellan highlights Lenin’s theoretical and philosophical views on, for example, the withering away of the state, his dialectical understanding of objectivity and subjectivity, and on national self-determination (pp. 107-116). But he condemns Lenin’s political practice, especially after the October Revolution. It is under Lenin that the Party becomes coextensive with the state, that
McLellan implies that these are anti-Marxist outcomes inherent to the Leninist party model. It is our view that party/state centralization was not just contingently necessary in the difficult circumstances of post-1917 Russia, but is generally necessary if revolution is to be consolidated and deepened. We recognize, however, that a centralized political system sharpens the contradictions between leadership and both workers and the 'people' more generally, but argue there is no necessity that the historical outcome of this contradiction is contrary to socialist development. Throughout his brief period of political power, albeit in very difficult circumstances, Lenin did not succeed in finding sufficient institutional and practical means to realize either a necessary degree of inner-party democracy or to maintain significant working class influence or oversight in the party.

McLellan condemns Stalin in terms that do not differentiate his analysis from standard, Western accounts of the great tyrant. While we don’t use the term “Stalinism” because we don’t believe that his contributions to theory and practice warrant an “ism,” we do take these contributions seriously. While they took both a right and a left form on different questions, ultimately we argue that Stalin initiated a new form of Soviet Revisionism consistent with the changed conditions of socialist construction, which took the USSR down a path towards the restoration of capitalism. Consistent with his antipathy to Stalin, McLellan is sympathetic to Trotsky, although his practice in the Bolshevik party, he argues, isolated him and undermined his effectiveness. We believe that, while the positions Trotsky took in political debate were not consistent, he was often to the left of the party, for example, on Brest-Litovsk, NEP, and world revolution. We find inadequate Trotsky’s analysis of bureaucracy as the root problem of class relations in socialist society, a problem with which, McLellan notes, Lenin also struggled. In the later versions of what became known as Trotskyism, which McLellan hardly touches (p. 153), we argue that the problem of ultra-leftism has been given permanent, quasi-organizational forms.

On China, McLellan emphasizes Mao’s early struggles in the 1920s and 1930s with misdirections from the Comintern and his realization, stated in On Contradiction that, in China, Marxism must be applied “in the light of China’s specific characteristics” (p. 228) – a phrase with unfortunate consequences in the present-day. These historically-specific characteristics initially included a more socially-conscious and interdependent peasantry, which was instrumental for the early development of socialist cooperatives up to 1956 (p. 238)—an analysis given concrete detail below in Chapter Seven. For Mao, the Chinese revolution was carried out principally by Communist Party (CCP) leadership of the peasantry, putting agriculture and politics first. McLellan argues that, since the industrial proletariat in China was very small, “proletarian” in the CCP referred more to a set of idealized qualities to which the masses were to aspire than to an actual social class. The absence of an actual proletariat during the revolution and socialist construction (presumably) led directly to the phenomenon of “substitutionism,” about which Trotsky had warned, through which the Party substitutes itself for the class (the proletariat). This substitutionism of the CCP, McLellan says, meant that the Party played “the role of the proletariat in the face of the peasantry whose initial aspirations were not socialist – [which] goes a long way to explaining the authoritarian nature of the party” (p. 244). We disagree with this deterministic analysis of the relationship between the Party and the proletariat (and other workers).

There were some examples of democratic rhetoric in the CCP, McLellan says, and he quotes Mao on the importance of the Mass Line, which still gives a central role to leadership. Despite some elements of democratic ideology, he critiques the high degree of centralization in
the Party and its secretive decision-making, which, beyond the size of the proletariat, is rooted in its “Stalinist” origins (pp. 244-7). Going back further still, McLellan argues that Chinese “‘history, culture and tradition’” are reflected in the patriarchal character of the CCP’s leadership, its hierarchical style of work, and the cult of personality surrounding Mao (p. 248). We also find these characteristics problematic and agree that the traditional roots of Chinese society weighed heavily on socialist construction and still persist in China. In a similar vein, McLellan points to the moral (ideological or political) emphasis of Chinese communism, “the incessant praise of the spirit of self-sacrifice, the fanatical rejection of material incentives, and the general asceticism and puritanism that pervaded Chinese society” (p. 256). In our view, however, China under Mao understood the problems of socialist construction in a new way and sought, unsuccessfully, to find the means to rectify the Leninist party model in a way that would maintain socialist development.

For McLellan, mass movements and particularly the Cultural Revolution are seen as essentially a matter of “struggle at the top of the Party” (p. 251). In contrast, we see the Cultural Revolution in the larger context of class struggle, as a last-ditch effort to steer the Chinese revolution away from the Soviet model of not just heavy industrialization first, but also from the consolidation of Soviet Revisionism. The Cultural Revolution, which is presently written off in China as ten lost years, may have been a harmful overall, but it was also a means to experiment with new institutions and practices to counter over-centralization of power, help develop socialist consciousness, and prevent reversion to capitalist development in China. As much as the Cultural Revolution was designed to expose ‘rightists,’ we argue that one of its principal lessons was the danger of ‘ultra-leftism’ within socialism and, by extension, within the Marxist movement. It was a problem to which Mao contributed, and it was reflected, as McLellan shows, in Chinese foreign policy after the Sino-Soviet split: the CCP believed the “social-imperialist” USSR had become a greater danger than American imperialism, not just to China but globally (p. 260).

McLellan recognizes that, in the 1950s, China began to diverge from the economic model that had been imported wholesale from the USSR. The Chinese Communist Party’s critique of the USSR was couched in terms of “the restoration of capitalism”, a charge, McLellan says, that was rooted in the widening material inequalities that benefitted an increasingly privileged stratum of the population, in the expansion of private ownership in the countryside, in the revival of capitalist methods of management and accounting, in the theory of the end of classes and class struggle in the USSR (while a new, aspiring bourgeois class had actually emerged), and finally in the doctrine of peaceful coexistence with capitalist countries (pp. 257-9). McLellan challenges the view that capitalism had been restored in the USSR in the pre-1989 period on many grounds. For example, he says, the definition of classes is related to the ownership of the means of production and not just to distribution. We would add, however, that de jure ownership must be separated from de facto control, and there are ways to reproduce relations of privilege other than strictly private property and inheritance laws.

Overall, we agree that referring to capitalist restoration in the USSR during this time misstates the case. But the political and economic tendencies in the USSR, which were the subject of Chinese criticism, reflected a hegemonic capitalist road. Consequently, the characterization of the USSR as socialist or capitalist are equally misleading. In this context, we believe, the concept Soviet Revisionism gains currency. We agree with McLellan that “the phenomena under question had their origin in the 1930s”, but interpret this history differently. Finally, McLellan concludes his critique of the CCP’s position on restoration by claiming “the idea of a peaceful transition of socialism back to capitalism is as little in keeping with Marxism as the reverse
process” (p. 259). On the contrary, we see the process compelling in theory and actualized historically, and distinguish its political and economic dimensions. In Soviet Revisionism, the economic shell of public ownership was maintained while the core of socialist politics and ideology were eroded to nothing. In China, the struggle against revisionism in the post-Mao era has succumbed to a new form of Capitalist Revisionism in which the shell of the Leninist political party remains intact while the most important economic sectors are thoroughly integrated into global capitalism. Furthermore, we argue that, once revisionism has triumphed in a previously socialist state, there can be no peaceful transition from revisionism to socialism. As always, new revolutionary politics depends on the development of objective and, we would say primarily, subjective factors, all subject to the context of time and place. In the absence of these subjective conditions, a variety of contingently appropriate opposition tactics may be progressive in the short term.

As noted above, McLellan’s *Marxism after Marx* carries this history into the wider world of academic theorizing. The cultural, ideological, and philosophical emphasis of Western Marxism since the 1920s occurred primarily apart from workers’ struggles or actual socialist movements. It was at its core anti-Leninist in principle—although not necessarily (Gramsci, Lukacs), although it should be noted that the situation was certainly different in the so-called Third World. Interestingly, McLellan points out Sartre’s critique of Bolshevism (not merely “Stalinism”) as a “self-perpetuating’, dictatorial, and substitutionist regime (p. 318), but not the critical support Sartre usually gave to the USSR in international politics on the grounds that US imperialism was the principal enemy of the world’s peoples.

In the 1960s, the radical measures of the Cultural Revolution and its initial base among student Red Guards helped to inspire a “New Left” in advanced capitalist nations. Shorn of any links with the working class or with the remnants of any Marxist party, the New Left gravitated easily to anarchistic principles and practices (p. 350). As McLellan shows, the New Left also dissolved just as easily, but not before degenerating into ultra-left versions of Marxism-Leninism and into terrorism (p. 352). We connect this not so “new” politics to the social origins of the New Left movement (class, racial, and gender privilege), and critique it as a form of ultra-leftism.

In conclusion, McLellan singles out three aspects of Marxism after Marx that should be “consigned to the mortuary.” The first, the ossified version of Marxism served up in the Soviet Union under Stalin, he says, has already been widely discredited. Two others still “seem to have considerable life in them.” Of these, one is the question of a planned economy, which he assimilates to what he calls the “statist form of Marxism” in Eastern Europe. The second is the theory and practice of a vanguard party, which, he says, is a party in advance of the working class and, in theory at least, acts for the benefit of workers (p. 370). He characterizes the practice of such a party as a “revolution from above.” On the question of politics, McLellan concludes “that Marxism-Leninism, in the industrial world at least, has very little future, at least in the medium term”; then adds, more bluntly, that it has “no conceivable future in Europe and North America” (pp. 370-1). Hence, he argues, given these two additions to nineteenth-century Marxism—a vanguard party and central planning—a Leninist party could be active only in Africa, Latin America, and Asia: “This is because the idea of a Vanguard Party appeals and has appealed over the decade to elites in these countries, who wish to use their elite status to modernise and catch up with the developed West” (p. 371). The “considerable life” of this model, then, is neither caricature nor farce, but monstrosity.

In one sense we agree with a version of this conclusion. The simple model of a highly centralized, political party, with its tentacles spreading throughout society and its hands controlling
the political and economic levers of society is a powerful device for elite domination and industrialization. It has been effective, for example in the USSR, in part in fascist Italy, to some extent in the capitalist hands of the various small “Tigers” of Asia, and now in post-revolutionary China. In our view, however, the political strategy followed in the USSR and China became neither Marxist nor Leninist, and did not reflect the progressive, socialist potential of the Marxist vanguard party, a potential that has not yet been realized. We argue below that Lenin and Mao, in particular, successfully reinterpreted Marxist revolutionary principles to fit concrete national cases, but that in neither case was the socialist direction of change maintained. (Similarly, the collapse of the decades-long revolutionary insurgency in Columbia in 2016 indicates serious inadequacies in the rural, peasant-based revolutionary strategy in contemporary times.) In what follows, we elaborate our criticisms of the various manifestations of revolutionary Marxism after Marx in the expectation that some of the core elements of the ideas of Marx and Lenin cannot be consigned to the mortuary but should remain vital guides to theory and practice.