

From Marxist Revolution to Technological Revolution

Changes in the interpretation of social reality in Eastern Europe
in the eyes of Gerhard Lenski

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Abstract: In 1996, an paper by Gerhard Lenski appeared in the *Czech Sociological Review* entitled, “Ecological-Evolutionary Theory and Societal Transformation in Post-Communist Europe”. This article is a critical response to it and what the author sees as Lenski’s changing and flawed interpretation of social reality, as can be followed in his work dating back to 1978. The author criticises Lenski’s theoretical perspectives, and also the scientific methods by which he arrives at his “Ecological-Evolutionary Theory”.

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“...the Marxist era of experimentation is far from over. Marxist societies of the early twenty-first century will almost certainly differ from those of the present as much as those of the present differ from Stalin’s Russia in the nineteen-thirties. Thus, the challenge to sociology to monitor these experiments continues. In fact, I would argue that it becomes more important with each passing year.” [Lenski 1978: 381]

With these words, which undoubtedly sound like the gloomy prophecy of Cassandra to a large majority of the inhabitants of the former Soviet bloc, Gerhard Lenski concluded the 1978 essay “Marxist Experiments with Desratification: An Appraisal”. Eighteen years on, his article concerning the social transformation in post-communist Europe was published in the *Czech Sociological Review*. This article predicts yet another revolutionary future for our region. In this case, it is not a Marxist future, but instead a technological one [Lenski 1996]. In covering the ground between these two viewpoints Lenski embarked on an intellectual pilgrimage, an adventure which might be followed with interest.

In 1978 Lenski came upon the fact of how little attention social scientists in the western world devoted to what he calls “experiments carried out by Marxist regimes”. He claimed that the main obstacle, insufficient information, disappeared with “the thaw” of the mid 1950s. A number of information sources were available:

- official government statistics, the credibility of which corresponded to western standards of the period,
- studies by Eastern European sociologists,
- data and analysis by dissidents (e.g. Sakharov, Solzhenitsyn),
- literary works examining repressive practices (e.g. the misuse of psychiatry),

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- reports from the Eastern European and Soviet press,
- the work of émigré sociologists,
- reports by western analysts.

After a methodological observation devoted to the credibility of the official statistics, Lenski depicted the successes and failures of Marxist societies, the first of which he finds in the economic sphere:

“...one of the most impressive successes of Marxist societies has been the demonstration that modern societies do not require the private ownership of the means of production or a free enterprise system to enjoy the fruits of rapid economic growth.” [Lenski 1978: 369]

Lenski attributed other successes to decreases in social and income inequalities.

He listed five failures, and cited the first and most obvious, as “political inequality” [Ibid.: 371], which was especially expressed in the enormous number of political prisoners. He saw the source of “political inequality” in the inflexibility of the communists concerned with their monopoly on power and authoritative rule, but all the same he adds:

“This is not to deny that other segments of the population can make their influence felt, as in the case of the Polish worker’s riots in December 1970...” [Ibid.: 371]

The second failure could be perceived in the inability to remove differences in the attractiveness of different kinds of work. The third resided in the position of women, which was recognised as being worse than in non-Marxist societies. The fourth failure was the continued inequality felt between urban and rural areas, and the fifth, and according to Lenski the most serious, refers to “the limited progress that has been made in the efforts to create ‘the new socialist man’” [Ibid.: 375].

Lenski differentiates between various generations of Marxist societies. The first was made up of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European satellites. The second generation was considered the regimes established in the 1960’s: Maoist China, Castro’s Cuba, and the third being the states of the Third World: Laos, Cambodia, Ethiopia, Mozambique, and Angola, which, he believes, can be safely ignored. But this does not hold for the fourth generation, he states:

“It may not be safe, however, to do the same with what could become in the years ahead a fourth generation of Marxist societies in western Europe – in Italy, Spain, and France. For in these countries, there is increasing evidence that a significant part of the leadership of the Communist parties has, indeed, studied the failures of Soviet society and is prepared to learn from these failures. I am referring, of course, to the emergence in recent years of the varied tendencies that have collectively been dubbed Eurocommunism.” [Ibid.: 378]

In the conclusion of his article, Lenski considered the relationship between the spheres of economics and politics. He inquired if “extreme political inequality” was not the unavoidable price for minimising “economic inequality”:

“This may well be one of those unpleasant situations where two noble ideals are mutually subversive, and some kind of unpleasant trade-off is required. In other words, gains in *political* equality come at the expense of losses in *economic* equality – and vice versa.” [Ibid.: 380]

Lenski is convinced that the answer to this question will be provided by the future development of Marxist societies, as the citation introducing this contribution also proves.

Although his honesty is not in question, one does not need to scrutinise too closely to come to the conclusion that throughout this endeavour the world of socialist realism

has remained incomprehensible for Lenski. However, it is far more interesting to look for the answer to the question of how it happened that he was so mistaken.

To obtain the answer it will be best to consider his method. At first we must consider the fact that Lenski locates the beginning of available, credible information concerning Russia from the second half of the 1950s to the time of the Khrushchev “thaw”. We can accept this only if we classify a non-Marxist critique of the Soviet system as unreliable.

If Lenski respects literary inspiration, how can he overlook the fact that many authors had already written about the horrors of Leninist communism between the wars, among them literary figures of such standing as Vladimir Nabokov? Moreover, it is almost completely incomprehensible how Lenski’s work on stratification can omit an author who has contributed to the theoretical state of this discipline as no other, namely Pitirim Sorokin. As Kerenski’s personal secretary, Sorokin had a shocking experience with practical Marxism, which was projected into his works [Sorokin 1994].

Three years before the publication of Lenski’s essay, Václav Havel wrote a letter to Czechoslovakia’s president at that time, Gustáv Husák. These lines are to be found in his introduction:

“In our factories and offices work is done with discipline, the work of the citizens has visible results, moderately raising the standard of living, people are building houses, buying cars, having children, enjoying themselves, living.” [Havel 1990: 19]

Only the very superficial observer, limited to macroeconomic and other statistical data, is able to maintain faith in this line of thought. It seems that Lenski is exactly this type of observer; otherwise he would not be able to write: “Above all, socialist ideals apparently have won the respect of the great majority of citizens in Eastern Europe.” [Lenski 1978: 375] It is unfortunate that Lenski never read the rest of Havel’s letter, for he would have read:

“The basic question which it is necessary here to ask goes: why in actual fact do people behave as they do; why do they do everything that in its entirety creates the stately feeling of a totally united society which supports its government? I think that for every unbiased observer the answer is clear: *fear* drives them to do it.” [Havel 1990: 20]

It is truly this text which, in spite of not coming from a sociologist’s pen, represents a far more delving sociological imagination and would have helped Lenski to realise how the academic separation of the political from the economic sphere is professionally unacceptable and morally depressing.

The open disrespect for individual human destiny that Lenski shares with Marxists most flagrantly appears in his remarks concerning the beginning of Maoism (despite describing Maoist horrors quite colourfully a few lines later):

“This was a heady period and Marxist intellectuals in this country and Europe can certainly be excused for reviving the old claim (first stated by Western visitors to the Soviet Union in the nineteen-twenties), ‘I have seen the future and it works.’” [Lenski 1978: 376]

Perhaps in 1978 Lenski was not a Marxist, and surely did not openly confess to this. However, it must be asked whether he shares with them the information resources; the belief that social reality can be revealed through means of economic, and for that matter, other statistical data; convictions regarding the principal advantages of economic equality; and the neglect of the individual. It must be asked how Lenski’s opinion differs from that of the Marxists.

The collapse of the Marxist regimes, which by its suddenness surprised the huge majority of laymen, as well as experts, and which certainly surprised Lenski to the same degree, offered him an appropriate opportunity to bid farewell to old mistakes. It must be said right here that he lost this opportunity in an article entitled "New Light on Old Issues: The Relevance of 'Really Existing Socialist Societies' for Stratification Theory". [Lenski 1994]

The passage from Lenski's 1994 essay on the world of socialism that is probably the most worthy of consideration is the sentence which summarises his evaluation of the article from 1978: "Looking back, I believe these conclusions have stood the test of time fairly well." [Ibid.: 56] Since up to this point the criticism has focused solely on Lenski's theoretical perspectives, it is now necessary to turn attention to his scientific method, the rules of which he breaks in order to defend his personal integrity.

As documented above, in his original work, Lenski names two major successes and five failures of Marxist societies. In his 1994 summary of this earlier thesis, as far as concerns successes, the achievement seems to be simply "reducing economic inequality," whereas on "the fruits of rapid economic growth without private ownership," which originally for him was "one of the most impressive successes" of the Eastern bloc societies, he remains innocently silent. Similarly, as concerns the number of failures, where he once had five, we find only two [Ibid.: 56]. This hesitancy is only magnified by the way in which Lenski has revised his previous conclusions: for example, there were bigger economic differences than were supposed, which he documents with a journalistic reference to the personal wealth of communist dictators. Even though he writes of the substantial spread of poverty, it remains evident that the basis of the "economic equalities" he propounds, as witnessed by the experience of one of the most advanced socialist countries of the 1980s, where a labourer might meet a university professor in a queue for scarce toilet paper, continually escapes Lenski due to his superficial concern for statistics.

Lenski rests his essay on two theses. First, with great emphasis, he elaborates on his original idea, according to which Marxism failed due to "unrealistic assumptions about human character." This is admittedly true, but it is not Lenski's revelation. Already, as early as the 1940s, Ferdinand Peroutka, in his "Answer to the Left," had written:

"We should not pretend that the sheer fact of adopting the socialisation plan brings immediate salvation to everything and everyone. Each work encompasses both the intention and the realisation. Some are satisfied when they adopt the intention. They overlook the realisation. Socialism has its noble moral and its practical productive sides. The political and moral side of socialisation is over, solved and adopted; now we have to face to the hard needs of production. Once again, economic life will require reason rather than passion, rather more work ethics and discipline, rather more expert work and cool calculation. Without this the socialisation will break down and will turn into a slough of dearth and poor living standard". [Peroutka 1947: 128-129]

And this idea in my opinion is not advanced by Lenski.

The second thesis can be found at the end of Lenski's essay. It claims, "to paraphrase Marx", in that contemporary western societies allocate rewards partly on the basis of need, partly on the basis of work and partly on the basis of property:

“In short, they combine elements of communism, socialism, and capitalism and are the product of trial-and-error experimentation guided, in large measure, by a spirit of pragmatism.” [Lenski 1994: 59]

In this way Western societies have accomplished what scholarly theorists have failed to achieve, since in practice “they have created a workable synthesis of out of seemingly contradictory principles of allocation” [Ibid.: 60]. Face to face with this truly dialectic argumentation we have to surrender. In this light, the fatal collapse of Marxist ideas in the Eastern bloc, with the wave of a magic wand, has turned into compromise, but into victory all the same. Consequently, can it not be said that the welfare states of Western Europe are classless societies?¹

This is not to say that the result of the conflict of the superpowers in the second half of the twentieth century has been fully awarded to the West – simply because it won. New dominating issues have arisen to confront the modern world, (‘North-South’ conflict, ecological crises, the growth of social problems) which cast doubt upon the concept of industrialism as such. The fact that Lenski’s scant attention to these phenomena in 1978 is equally absent sixteen years later only goes to further support the conclusion concerning the lack of initiative in his methods and theoretical perspectives.²

How much more sociologically productive is an approach that places the situation of the individual in a social context at the centre of attention, instead of general information about the whole, can be seen in the already quoted ‘non-sociologist’ Václav Havel. The following passage from the essay “Power of the Powerless”, completed under the actual circumstances in 1978, convincingly documents the depth he reached:

“...it does not seem that traditional parliamentary democracies offered a way to fundamentally confront the ‘juggernaut’ of technical civilisation, as well as industrial, and consumer societies; but they are dressed as such and therefore helpless; only, a manner which manipulates the person is eternally more gentle and refined than the brutal manner of the post-totalitarian system.” [Havel 1990: 127]³

At this point we could take our leave of Gerhard Lenski, as with the type of left-oriented western social scientists, for whom the Eastern bloc made up a “unique set of laboratories for observing the effects of ‘truly existing socialism’” [Lenski 1994: 55] and who today, after the loss of these laboratories, poorly hide their hesitancy. We could have done this only if the benevolent *Czech Sociological Review* had not published the essay “Ecological-Evolutionary Theory and Societal Transformation in Post-Communist Europe,” [Len-

¹) There is perhaps no reason why we should deny Marxists the joy of this eventual victory. After all, from their point of view Lenski’s reinterpretation of reality may be solid. The principal reason of my reservations towards them rests with the fact that their theoretical and methodological devices, as I have tried to document, are cumbersome, misleading, and ethically inferior.

²) It is necessary to emphasise that this method leading to similar picturesque conclusions regarding the Eastern bloc has even been used by social scientists hailing from (neo-)liberal positions. Larry Summers offers an extremely threatening example. In October of 1991, as one of the foremost economists of the World Bank at the annual meeting in Thailand, he predicted a bright future for Russia. According to him “after seventy years of Communism Russia can still take advantage of a real work ethic” and from the “clear entrepreneurial powers of the black market.” [George and Sabelli 1994: 105]

³) Havel used the term “post-totalitarian system” to describe the former Marxist society.

ski 1996] in its fourth volume. In this article, Lenski places his “old issues” once again into a “new light.”

Ecological-Evolutionary theory, Lenski’s new theoretical device, rests on the thesis according to which the character of human society is determined by three main factors:

- our species’ genetic heritage,
- the biophysical environments to which societies must adapt,
- the technologies that societies possess [Ibid.: 149-150].⁴

From these standpoints there are two conclusions. The first we already know well: Marxism failed because of mistaken assumptions concerning human nature. In the interpretation outlined in Lenski’s new theoretical concept, Marxist ideology came into conflict with the potentialities of modern technology, and therefore succumbed to it. This is definitely a unique criticism of Marxism: Lenski reproaches Marxism for not being materialistic enough and in relation to human nature calls it “a secularised variant of classical Christian doctrine.” [Ibid.: 151] The true materialistic concept of history according to Lenski, is however ecological-evolutionary theory. Therefore, the failures of Marxism can consequently be explained best by those features where it deviates from this theory. Marxism placed the importance of ideology above technology, and in reality the reverse is true.

Here it is possible to note another serious deficiency of Lenski’s conception. Despite the title of the theory, which he supports, it seems that Gerhard Lenski has remained unaffected by the literature warning of the *ecological limits of technological development*. However, it is here where the strong tension within the ecological-evolutionary theory lies, and this tension is today growing rapidly. By overlooking this, Lenski removes the major supportive motive of his theory and as such severely decreases its credibility, which is already shaky due to the omitted ethical foundations of social behaviour.

Literature on this subject has flourished since 1962, when the seminal work of Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* [Carson 1962], was published, creating an unprecedented sway. Recently, the literature has been exploring other notable topics, with which Lenski deals only superficially concerned with the relationship of technology and ideology. As Jerry Mander convincingly proves, technological development can itself be a rigid pillar of ideology [Mander 1991].

Lenski’s second conclusion is some kind of vision of post-communist Europe’s future. With the use of topics currently occupying the sociological discourse (post-industrial society, social impacts of modern technology, the results of economic globalisation) he predicts the future for us, determined to a certain degree by the tension between the possibilities and threats which modern technology allows:

“the most revolutionary force at work in the world at large today is technological innovation. And, I would add, the prospects for slowing this force in the near-term future seem negligible,...” [Lenski 1996: 155]

⁴) The obvious unmanageability of this simplifying concept is displayed well by Europe of the 1940s. According to such criteria, there should not be any serious difference between Britain and Germany of the time. It is clear that the ethical foundations of social arrangement cannot be omitted.

If we agree with those ecologically-oriented authors who believe that it is truly this “most revolutionary power” which is responsible for the majority of global devastation,⁵ then there is nothing left for us but to hope that the course of time will prove Lenski’s current predictions as adequate as those he made in 1978.

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⁵) These works are well known also on the Czech sociological scene [Keller 1993, Librová 1994].

