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RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Marxism and Architectural Theory across the East-West Divide

Hilde Heynen and Sebastiaan Loosen

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Architectural theory as we know it today is informed by Western, neo-Marxist theories. But throughout history Marxism has influenced architectural thinking in many more ways than just through this well-known intellectual trajectory. Distinct forms of Marxist architectural theory have been articulated in countries where orthodox Marxism was the foundation of political theory or where Marxism inspired revolutionary or postcolonial struggles. This Special Collection of *Architectural Histories* examines architectural theory and its Marxist imprint in the Second and Third World from the 1950s to the 1980s, the interconnections between these different countries and traditions and the entanglements with postcolonial or anti-imperialist theories. It offers a preliminary inventory of what was going on where, and who were some of the key figures. It provides the groundwork for a more precise mapping of the worldwide impact of Marxist thinking on architectural discourse.

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## Introduction

Architectural theory as we know it today is thoroughly informed by Western, neo-Marxist theories of the Frankfurt School and others. The legacy of critical thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Ernst Bloch has been formative for authors such as Manfredo Tafuri, Joan Ockman, K. Michael Hays and Fredric Jameson. Later versions of critical architectural theory, further inspired by gender studies and postcolonial theories, built upon this established tradition. This trajectory is well known and by now well covered in multiple anthologies and handbooks (Crysler, Cairns and Heynen 2012; Hays 1998; Leach 1997; Nesbitt 1996). Yet throughout history, Marxism has influenced architectural thinking in many more ways than just through this particular intellectual trajectory. Approaching these ‘other’ Marxist trajectories on their own terms is a challenging task. Historian Harry Harootunian argues that the intellectual legacy of what has become known as ‘Western Marxism’ receives significantly more coverage in historical accounts of Marxism, and its hegemonic role also affected the frameworks by which Marxist thought is understood and valued in a variety of contexts. In fact, he says, ‘there have been few more important episodes in the history of Marxism than its provincialization in the figure of what the Soviets named “Western Marxism”’ (Harootunian 2015: 1). For this reason, Harootunian, himself a specialist in Japanese intellectual history, calls for the ‘deprovincialization’ of Marx in order to recover other genealogies of Marxist thinking, shaped as they are by the contingent historical and local circumstances within which they took place. This deprovincialization

then amounts not simply to an expanded geographic inclusion, but also, in epistemic terms, to a broadened and intrinsically plural understanding of historicity, one that cannot be fully measured by the yardstick provided by the Marxist canon that centres on a capitalist society that evolved in the West.

Harootunian’s call to ‘deprovincialize’ Marx is part of an ongoing process to redress the historiographic bias of ‘Western Marxism’ by ‘globalizing’ the canon of Marxist thought. Some scholars have, to a greater or lesser extent, foregrounded those ‘other’ historical trajectories and traditions of Marxist thinking that are otherwise unacknowledged or underacknowledged (Glaser and Walker 2007; Hoff 2017; Liu and Murthy 2017; McLellan 2007; Wang and Iggers 2015). Others have tried to flesh out the conceptual blind spots concomitant to such bias (K. B. Anderson 2010; Harootunian 2015; Traverso 2016: Ch. 5). If the historiographical process of canonizing Marxism paid less attention to some trajectories and suffered from certain conceptual blind spots, the same holds true for the intersections of Marxism and architectural thought. The repository of Marxist thought indeed offers multiple vantage points from which to reflect on architecture. While architectural cultures in the West were incorporating the theoretical impulses offered by Adorno and the likes, distinct forms of Marxist architectural theory were being articulated in countries where orthodox Marxism was the foundation of political theory. In many of these countries, it was transformed from a revolutionary to a ruling doctrine (this was the case in the USSR and its satellite states in Eastern Europe, as well as in Maoist China).

The distinction between Western Marxism and orthodox Marxism itself has been activated since the Cold War, although its origins can be traced further back. Whereas the writings of Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin

functioned as doctrines for orthodox Marxism, Western Marxism is considered to find its source in György Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy* (also 1923) (Therborn 1996: 67–68). Both Lukács and Korsch were members of their respective communist parties in Hungary and Germany but were subsequently dismissed in their countries as deviant thinkers closer to their Western counterparts than to the ideology prescribed by the Communist Party. During the Cold War, the different intellectual trajectories in the development of Marxism increasingly grew apart, with neither recognizing the legitimacy of the other. In 1955 Maurice Merleau-Ponty applied the qualifier 'Western' to Marxism for the first time to point to this historical rift between the two Marxist bodies of thought that followed more or less geopolitical lines (1973: 30–58). Broadly speaking, in Western Marxism the focus shifted from labour and the production process in its most material aspects to the ways in which a capitalist market system structures thought and culture (P. Anderson 1976; Jay 1984).

After the publication of Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (1958), the general understanding in the West became that Soviet Marxism had lost its scholarly pertinence as well as its creative vitality, and that it was driven solely by political motivations of the state. Behind the Iron Curtain, on the other hand, Western Marxist thinkers were considered to be hopelessly entangled with the lures of capitalism, and hence not eligible as potential allies or intellectual sparring partners (Åman 1992). Even if this perception of distinctiveness might have been an artefact of the Cold War – given that cross-border exchanges continued to take place – it was a perception that affected the further development of both theoretical strands. By the time the Iron Curtain disintegrated in 1989, therefore, Soviet Marxism had intellectually petered out into near insignificance, leaving Maoism as the major inheritor of state-driven Marxism.

Meanwhile the geopolitical world system had become more complicated than the East–West divide suggested. Yugoslavia, which according to Cold War logic belonged to the Eastern bloc, followed a rather independent course under Josip Tito, aspiring to a form of socialism that was based on the ideal of self-management. In the late 1950s Tito would set up the Non-Aligned Movement, together with Jawaharlal Nehru from India, Gamal Abdel Nasser from Egypt, Sukarno from Indonesia and Kwame Nkrumah from Ghana, thus giving rise to what came to be known as the 'Third World'. In these contexts Marxism was often an inspiring political theory, taking different intellectual trajectories, often in close connection with anti- and post-colonial tendencies, such as in the works of Frantz Fanon or C.L.R. James (Fanon 1961; James 1938; Nash 2016).

These complicated and convoluted trajectories and traditions of Marxist thinking are today far less well known internationally than the established canon of neo-Marxism. They have been understudied, partially because they evolved in relative isolation from international networks of communication in the First World – a factor that weighs more forcefully for theoretical discussions than for a more neutral exchange of technological know-how

(Glendinning 2009). What also played a role is that, after 1989, there was a reluctance in Eastern Europe to revisit the communist years and to address communist knowledge production as more than just politically informed propaganda. Likewise, after China began to adopt a more open reform-policy under Deng Xiaoping, aiming at a market-based form of socialism, China distanced itself more and more from Maoist orthodoxy, discouraging its students and scholars from intensively studying this particular period in its history. Gradually, however, we now see an increasing openness among researchers to ask critical questions and to study theoretical discourses as they unfolded in both Eastern Europe and East Asia in the decades after the Second World War.

This new openness has first of all enriched the architectural histories of those communist (or formerly communist) countries that until the turn of the century had not been abundantly present on the global map (see Nitzan-Shiftan and Stieber 2018). Following the appearance of the pioneering book by Anders Åman (1992), many studies have taken a closer look at architectural production in communist Europe, in the Soviet Union and in China (for example, Lu 2006; Miljački 2017; Molnár 2013; Moravánszky et al. 2016; Stanek 2014; Stierli and Kulić 2018; Urban 2009; Zhu 2009). Although architectural theory has not been totally ignored, it rarely took centre stage in these books. The interaction between a Marxist-Leninist (or Maoist) outlook on society on the one hand and ideas about architecture on the other deserves to be better studied, since, for instance, key protagonists of the modern movement of the 1920s were no stranger to communism. Numerous individuals adhered to both communism and architectural modernism – Hannes Meyer, Hans Schmidt, Helena Syrkus, Karola Bloch and Grethe Schütte-Lihotzky in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, and Liang Sicheng might be the best known example in China, even if others were earlier and more directly engaging with modernism (Kögel 2010; Rowe and Kuan 2002). The intellectual trajectories of these actors crisscrossed the political boundaries created by world history, and they struggled to align their political convictions with their architectural ideas. Now that the Cold War itself has become a thing of the past and adherence to political ideology has become a much more implicit affair, the task of studying the implications of these entanglements as well as the transformations (or should we say 'distortions?') that affected architectural theory when the state took control has become more urgent and topical.

## Overview

This Special Collection thus examines architectural theory and its Marxist imprint in the Second and Third World from the 1950s to the 1980s. It investigates the interconnections between these different countries and traditions and unravels entanglements with postcolonial or anti-imperialist theories. The articles in this collection provide the first exploration of these issues, a preliminary inventory of what was going on where and who were some of the key figures. They establish the groundwork for a more precise mapping of the worldwide impact of Marxist thinking on architectural discourse.

Hungary, the fatherland of major Marxist thinker György Lukács, is fertile ground for exploring the relations between Marxist thinking and architectural theory. Ákos Moravánszky, in his contribution to this Special Collection, relates how Lukács played a key role in the ousting of Máté Major, a CIAM member, communist, architect, professor and author, during the so-called Big Debate in 1951. Moravánszky masterfully interweaves the biographical narrative of Major and other architects with a discussion of the main intellectual currents in the country, embodied by authors who were also known in the West, such as György Konrád and Ágnes Heller. He shows how many of these figures participated in critical reinterpretations of Marxism intended to humanize the regime and its built environment. While their efforts often provoked official responses, they were nevertheless proof of the continuation of vital intellectual traditions and practices that engaged with different forms of critical theories.

Humanism was also a factor in Czechoslovakia, where architect Gorazd Čelechovský designed Eteara, an ideal communist city for 135,000 inhabitants. Maroš Krivý traces how both Marxist humanism and cybernetic systems theory influenced the design of this ideal city. In his design Čelechovský pursued the idea of 'meaningful' architecture, one that could provide an ideal living environment in a post-industrial situation, where communism would have reached its next stage. Far from being solely informed by the demands of the regime, the case shows how intellectuals and architects were exploring different notions of the future, addressing difficult issues such as the relationship between city and country, the balance of automation and socio-psychological meaning and the tensions between political emancipation and cybernetic control.

The relationship between city and country was likewise at stake in planning theories in socialist Yugoslavia, the focus of the paper by Nikola Bojić. He analyses how the efforts to decentralize socio-economic planning according to the logic of workers' self-management paradoxically resulted in uneven territorial development. The undesired effects of this unevenness – a rural exodus and an all too rapid urbanization – were tackled by regional planning, which took its clues from Ludwig Hilberseimer's theoretical works on the subject. Hence in Yugoslavia intellectual discussions about spatial issues were also not self-contained, as the Iron Curtain supposedly dictated, but clearly informed by international, including Western, sources.

The contribution by Sheila Crane explores how the Yugoslavian ideology of self-management mutated into the idea of 'autogestion' in socialist Algeria, giving rise to theoretical explorations of postcolonial and post-revolutionary Algerian architecture. The architect Abderrahman Bouchama outlined a new path for such an architecture, which would be inspired by select monuments of a shared Arab-Islamic past. Discussing Bouchama's ideas in conjunction with those of his contemporaries Frantz Fanon, Georgette Cottin-Euziol and Anatole Kopp, Crane highlights the difficult relationship between theory and practice, between political ideals and economic constraints, and shows how their dialectics pertain to specifically architectural questions.

Ke Song then addresses the relationship between political ideology and architectural discourse in Mao's China (1949–1976). He scrutinizes the official publication *Jianzhu Xuebao* [Architectural Journal] to trace the changing understandings of what Chinese architecture should be about, from the creation of the National Style in 1954, to the Socialist New Style in 1959 and the Design Revolution in 1964, to the 'New Architecture' of the Cultural Revolution in 1973. He shows how the complicated meanderings of Chinese architectural discourse should be understood as a negotiation between Marxist theoretical impulses, Maoist interpretations thereof and specific political needs of the moment. This negotiation gave rise to a seemingly volatile discourse, overdetermined by political ideology. Song argues that nevertheless some clear patterns can be discerned, which had to do with the central metaphor of 'container' and 'content'. Insofar as the discourse never succeeded in precisely defining the relationship between 'container' and 'content', it *de facto* supported a certain architectural autonomy which allowed for an accumulation of architectural knowledge, regardless of the influence of state ideology and political movements.

In the interview with Łukasz Stanek, conducted by Hilde Heynen and Sebastiaan Loosen, guest editors of this Special Collection, we discuss the richness of the cases at hand. Stanek, a prolific author and recognized expert in the field, provides some perspective on the reasons the topics of these essays have been obscured from view. Studying the interactions between the First, Second and Third World requires some intricate footwork, because the archives and their framing narratives tend to make research difficult. Stanek's earlier dealings with Henri Lefebvre, and his thorough knowledge of the architectural exchanges between the Second and the Third World – the central theme of his upcoming book *Architecture in Global Socialism* – make him an ideal partner in this conversation.

## Discussion

In producing this Special Collection, several challenges came to the fore, of which we would like to highlight two. Whilst the historical narratives offered in this collection are an important step in 'deprovincializing' Marx, to refer back to Harootyan's phrase, at the same time, this 'deprovincialization' of Marxism's history is also what Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000) set forth as theory's challenge, to 'provincialize Europe'. If these articles offer accounts that scarcely registered on the radar of the history of architectural theory, it is perhaps because they require us to confront our own rather biased notion of 'theory', which we still seem to locate in the pen of the individual author who, from a distanced view, critically reflects on society. Lexically, in architectural theory we tend to use 'theory' without an article, as an uncountable noun, more or less to point in a general sense to a process of critical reflection, and not to one theory in particular. Yet, in the process of editing this collection, crossing through the many linguistic and cultural boundaries of the authors and their primary sources, the strict logic between 'theory', 'a theory', and 'the theory' appeared to be held together only with loose screws, and this in turn might be symptomatic



of the different statuses that ‘theory’ has within different societies and architectural cultures. For instance, in the context of Mao’s China, as Ke Song shows, the ideal image of the intellectual playing field of theoretical reflection was not an open-ended one where multiple contradicting voices could stand next to one another, but one driven by an impetus, in the spirit of ‘democratic centralism’, to come to a decision at the end of the day on what the ‘right way’ was.

The two challenges we would like to highlight relate to this ‘locale’ of theory. The first challenge is that posed by politicized discourse, where there is a strong cross-contamination between architectural discourse and politics. Even if discourse can never be entirely separated from the political conditions in which it emerges, in societies where the leeway for ‘free’ speech is rather small and where discussion is to a large degree subject to political logic, theory takes on a different guise and intellectual history tends to merge with political history, resulting in a rather volatile intellectual landscape changing at the pace of politics. This challenges the historian to come to terms, one way or another, with what was often an inextricable cocktail of ideological rhetoric, sincere beliefs, pragmatic self-preservation and perhaps hidden criticism. It is tempting to dismiss politicized discourse as mere rhetoric, and to highlight a gap between what people say and what they actually think, as subjects torn between their public and private personae, between ‘discourse’ and ‘reality’. Yet, as anthropologists such as Alexei Yurchak and Katherine Verdery argue, even in those contexts ‘struggles in the realm of discourse’ gain significance in themselves and cannot be fully dismissed as meaningless (Verdery 1991, cited in Vais 2016; Yurchak 2005). Hence it is not only a challenge to recover those instances of theory formation where critical reflection goes ‘underground’ (Bedford 2016), but also to recognize the mechanisms of politicized discourse itself.

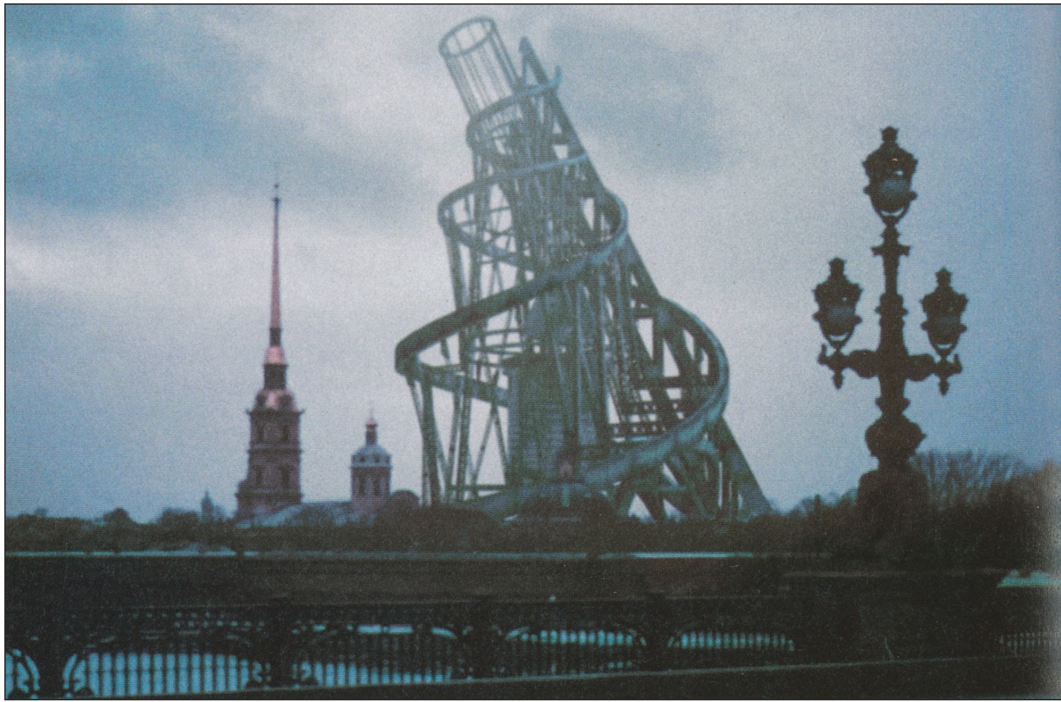
For instance, it would be a retrospective projection to assume that people might not actually believe in or understand what they were saying when they were engaging with official political discourse. Rare biographical accounts, such as that of Liang Sicheng in China, that narrate how these protagonists actually lived through these experiences on a personal level attest to this. Even at the end of his life, as recounted by his second wife and collaborator, Lin Zhu, after he had been a target of the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and endured severe punishments and humiliating experiences, Liang Sicheng still retained an almost naïve faith in the righteousness of the Communist Party. Despite being unable to figure out what the criticisms of his education and work as ‘reactionary’, ‘rightist’ and ‘bourgeois’ actually meant, his loyalty to the Party seemed to hold, and he strove to reconcile his thought with the principles of dialectical materialism (Fairbank 1994: 176–190). On the other hand, the phenomenon of ‘double-speak’ – evoking an additional meaning different from what is claimed at face value – cannot be entirely dismissed either. What is one to make of the shifts in theoretical stances of Helena Syrkus, for example? An ardent believer in modern art and architecture before and during the war, she was closely

acquainted with such protagonists as Le Corbusier and Picasso. She was highly regarded within CIAM and elected vice-president in 1948. She nevertheless disavowed modernist architecture during the CIAM conference in Bergamo (1949), defending socialist realism instead, and provoked a resounding controversy with Ernesto Rogers (Giedion 1958: 87). Her defence of socialist realism was at that moment in line with her communist beliefs and certainly inspired by discussions with her fellow Communist Party members regarding the reconstruction of Warsaw. Some years later, however, she again changed gears, now complaining about the constraints of socialist realism and reconnecting with a discourse that was much closer to that of Western modernists (Leśniakowska 2011).

This brings us to our second challenge related to the locale of theory. If discussion is subject to control, and discourse is politicized, critical thinking finds other outlets, requiring the historian to reckon with a wider intellectual landscape. Thus, as Ákos Moravánszky in this collection shows for Hungary, or Karin Hallas-Murula (2016) elsewhere for Estonia, when the professional media of architecture failed to address architecture’s socio-cultural aspects, other disciplines, such as sociology or environmental psychology, sometimes served as more fruitful platforms to critically reflect on architecture. Likewise, as the contributions of Maroš Krivý and Nikola Bojić demonstrate, newer disciplines such as systems theory, cybernetics or regional planning acted as vehicles that could pierce the East–West divide.

In such contexts, a special role is reserved for translation as the locale of theory. Under the Soviet regime, writers who did not agree with the doctrine of socialist realism, such as Boris Pasternak, tended to redirect their energies to translating world literature (Clark 2011). Similarly, when Máté Major in Hungary discusses Western modern architecture in his encompassing Marxist *History of Architecture* in the 1950s with an explicitly distanced view, justifying its inclusion for didactic reasons, or when Liang Sicheng and Lin Huiyin translated the Athens Charter in 1951, prefaced with a note that they introduce the charter ‘while objecting to CIAM’s theory on architectural form, in order to separate the wheat from the chaff’ (cit. in Ji 2007: 86, translation amended), it is difficult to take such caveats at face value and at least tempting to detect outright sympathy for the matter at hand. And more importantly, even if bracketed with critical comments, be they genuine or not, such work had the important effect of disseminating Western modernist ideas in their respective countries.

These examples make it very clear that it is almost impossible to write architectural histories from a ‘neutral’ or ‘unpolitical’ perspective – even if this is how many architectural historians like to think about their own work. Such difficult assessments arise when dealing with architectural histories and theories in countries that have long since adopted ideologies other than the liberalism and capitalism that most Western historians take for granted. Can one write about architecture and architectural theory in Mao’s China without the slightest sympathy for the ambitions of the state? Can one write about postcolonial architectural ideas and projects in Algeria without identifying – at



**Figure 1:** Still from 'Tatlin's Tower', Takehiko Nagakura's *Unbuilt Monuments* series, 1999. Retouched image used at the outset of Svetlana Boym's *Architecture of the Off-Modern*. Reproduced from Jodidio (2001: 430).

least to a certain extent – with some of these ideas and aspirations? Addressing the vicissitudes of Marxist thinking that intersects with architectural theories across the world inevitably means opening questions such as these. And if we do that, the inevitable consequence might be that we also need to critically confront and question the intellectual hegemony of the legacy of Western neo-Marxism within current architectural theory – enriching and enlightening as that legacy still might be. Studying the intersections of architectural theory and political conditions in the Second and Third World indeed should bring us to an awareness of the weight of positionality – not just for those 'other' architects and thinkers, but also with respect to our own viewpoints and our own conditioning by First World assumptions and ideologies.

### Coda

Deprovincializing Marxism, provincializing Europe, questioning intellectual hegemonies: these moves generate alternative genealogies that disturbingly pluralize our notion of historical progress. Like the montage of Tatlin's tower in the cityscape of St. Petersburg (**Figure 1**), an image of socialist aspirations hovering between the built and the unbuilt, between the different temporalities of a utopian construction site and a nostalgic ruin, the articles in this Special Collection investigate 'side alleys and lateral potentialities of the project of critical modernity', as Svetlana Boym once put it (2008: 4).

### Authors' Note

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The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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