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**SOCIALISM  
AND  
MODERNITY**  
PETER BEILHARZ

**Benjamin Robinson.** *The Skin of the System: On Germany's Socialist Modernity.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009. ix + 355 pp. Illustrations. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-6247-2; \$67.50 (e-book), ISBN 978-0-8047-7248-8.

**Reviewed by** Peter C. Caldwell (Rice University)

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## Socialism and Modernity

The collapse of state socialism in Eastern Europe had necessary consequences for the concept of socialism itself. Despite the fact that the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship represented a reduced, even perverted form of socialism, it claimed to be a real and existing alternative to capitalism that also responded to the needs of the modern world, a modern alternative to capitalist modernity. But in 1989-91, state socialism in Europe collapsed; it seemed unable to cope with the needs of the modern world. Its planned economic system could not adapt to the needs of the complicated, technology-driven economy; its simple rhetoric of class unity failed to do justice to the complex division of labor in society; in general its centralized system of rule failed to comprehend the variety of self-regulating systems that seem to make up the modern world itself. The one variety of socialism that appeared to be clearly real and distinct from the capitalist world

had blocked the processes of modernization that would allow social systems to function correctly.[1]

Ideology, of course, resides in the very term “modern” and all its variants, and in this sense claims that socialism blocked modernization require examination. The word cannot become neutral; it cannot mean merely “contemporary” or “at present.” “Modern” implies something more, a qualitative nature of the given world, which no society can become unless its systems are aligned correctly with that nature. In short, in a thoroughly modern social system power does not interfere with but rather furthers production; forces and relations of production are aligned. Put in this way, the term “modern” seems, perhaps, a triumphalist ideology that equates our real, existing world of capitalism with what ought to be, a point that Benjamin Robinson makes in the first section

of his challenging book, *The Skin of the System: On Germany's Socialist Modernity*.

This point has been made before, and liberal claims of the “end of history” relentlessly criticized. But it is nonetheless hard to avoid passing a negative judgment on socialism. The one socialism that claimed to be both real and clearly distinct from capitalism failed to ensure the economic reproduction of its own economy, precisely because of the plan that was supposed to eliminate the crisis of economic reproduction; failed to ensure a predictable and stable legal system, precisely because of the state that was supposed to intervene to ensure correct legal outcomes; and failed to justify the—at times—despotic political system, which was supposed to be legitimate and secure against despotism. As a result, “socialism” today has an archaic rather than a modern connotation.

The two books under review take on the question of how socialism relates to modernity “after the fall,” in Peter Beilharz’s words. They ask in retrospect what, exactly, the relationship was between capitalism and socialism, and how socialism related to the disasters—the wars, the concentration camps, the exterminations—of the twentieth century. But they do so in very different ways. For Beilharz, in *Socialism and Modernity*, the chief error was to reduce the many vibrant strands of socialism to Bolshevism, whose value he questions as both a system and a body of theory. His project is therefore twofold: to unearth the many socialist traditions lost with the narrowing of the project and to engage in a postmortem of the failure of the socialist theorists to question their own interaction within totalitarianism. Robinson, by contrast, takes as his primary focus one lesser known author of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), Franz Fühmann, in order to see from this specific perspective how the myth of the East German state ripped apart the body of the socialist as well as the socialist system itself; to a great extent, Robinson, unlike Beilharz, accepts the argument that the Marxist-Leninist systems were socialism *per se*. In addition to the different formulations of the basic problem of how socialism and modernity relate, the two also have different approaches to theory. Indeed, their “socialist” traditions seem at times utterly disconnected from each other.

Beilharz’s book pulls together a series of essays written over the past twenty-five years that reflect his involvement with the influential journal *Thesis Eleven*, the Australian Left, the collapse of communism and a general rethinking of the socialist tradition, and his engagement with Zygmunt Bauman’s sociology of modernity.

These are not the same kind of in-depth theoretical engagements that are to be found in his important monographs. They are rather essays that reflect on the state of theory and politics, and that show Beilharz’s own development, starting with his engagement with the critical approach to state socialism of Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér and his early, critical work on Leon Trotsky, and culminating with more recent work on Americanism and utopianism. The essays are clearly rooted in the Marxist tradition, but also seek to show the limits of that tradition, indeed how Marxism excessively limited socialist thought at certain key moments.

The relationship between socialism and modernity is at the heart of the book. Beilharz does not identify socialism with Eastern European Marxist-Leninist state socialism; indeed, he writes disparagingly of the Soviet attempt to reduce the complex division of labor of modern society to the simplicity of class; the complex images of a future society to be found in Karl Marx (Beilharz finds five separate utopias) dwindles down to the process of industrialization and militarization. “The dominant image of a socialist utopia,” he writes, “was thus transformed, industrialized, flattened out ... and therefore lost” (Beilharz, p. 148).

Socialism, he argues, was and is not a specific form of social and political organization, then; it is rather an ethical claim, “a restatement of the priority of the social against individualism” (Beilharz, p. 15), a formulation that clearly echoes Eduard Bernstein. But that reformulation implies that socialism develops not so much against capitalism as within capitalism, as the constant, necessary, critical accompaniment of capitalism. Socialism, freed from sectarian bonds, necessarily includes communitarian critiques of abstract individualism (Ferdinand Tönnies), reaffirmation of the guild tradition (G. D. H. Cole), functionalist and complex conceptualizations of social organization (Sidney and Beatrice Webb), and a rethinking of the social individual as acting “intellectual,” creator of culture, even within modern systems (Antonio Gramsci). At some points, Beilharz’s set of essays reads like a celebratory reawakening of traditions lost because of Marxism; but the book also has a melancholy tone related to the contradictory fact that the very “efflorescence of Marxism coincided with its dissolution” (Beilharz, p. 22). Finally, Beilharz points out the centrality of America, that is, the United States, to the image of not just modernity but also socialist emancipation over the past century. And it was not just Vladimir Lenin, Leon Trotsky, and Gramsci who transformed American industrial management techniques into a militarized utopia.

As Beilharz notes, such a grey utopia may be found already in the work of Edward Bellamy. Against Bellamy, Beilharz reads Marx as a critical romantic, conceptualizing laborers working in community yet freed from the stultifying rigidity of the division of labor.

But the socialist tradition, and not only the Marxist-Leninist one, also played into the worst aspects of the twentieth century. Beilharz has spent much of the previous ten years engaging with the critical account of modernity developed by Bauman, a pessimistic account of state control wherein the utopians are revealed to be “budding social engineers” (Beilharz, p. 150) on the road to destruction. The hostility to parliament and enthusiasm for planning in fact connected fascism and Stalinism; “it is not so obvious,” Beilharz notes provocatively, “that fascism should be excluded from the labor movement story once Stalinism is included” (Beilharz, pp. 122-123). He does not, of course, call for an identification of fascism and socialism, but he does demand more careful consideration of the way specific intellectual strands (antidemocratic thinking, romantic notions of community, adulation of planning, and social engineering) could take on ideological forms, as apology for violent and capricious action.

But socialism did not have to culminate in catastrophe. And indeed, the socialist traditions that have survived the twentieth century are those that were never completely separate from capitalism—which has created socialism’s current crisis of identity: “The point is not that socialism has failed to conquer capitalism so much as it is that socialism has failed to keep its role as the alter ego of capitalism” (Beilharz, p. 140). Instead, socialism has served as capitalism’s “social partner,” providing a language for raising questions about housing and economic insecurity; a language about the social foundations of freedom and human dignity. In the face of an increasingly complex and opaque world (for which “globalization” may be too dull a term), such a language seems inadequate. The result has been rather grey politics, as Beilharz’s criticisms of “New Labor” in Australia and elsewhere indicate. And there remains, then, a certain tension between his definition of socialism as a “necessary utopia” (Beilharz, p. 200) and the rather less than utopian politicians who today embody socialism. Perhaps such is the price for recognizing the limits of freedom within necessity.

While Beilharz looks at the theoretical tradition that stood at the center of historical Marxism, Robinson’s main focus is an author little known in the United States,

and certainly a person who could not be considered a grand theorist of socialism. But FÃ¼hmann is in a way a perfect object of analysis for a study of the self-understanding of “real, existing socialism” and its many paradoxes. For FÃ¼hmann embodied these paradoxes. As a young Sudeten German, he joined the Nazi Stormtroopers, and was drafted into the army during the war, where he served on the eastern front. Captured by the Red Army, interned in a POW camp, he was transferred to an antifascist reeducation camp, where he came to criticize his own past and turned to Stalinism. As Robinson cogently notes, FÃ¼hmann’s later work investigates the notion that there was no third way between fascism (and capitalism) and socialism. FÃ¼hmann became an important member of the Bitterfeld movement in East German literature, which sought a new socialist realist aesthetic in the early 1960s. Like many of these talented authors, he began in the 1970s to reevaluate his own history and the place of culture in socialism. That process culminated in the Biermann controversy, where FÃ¼hmann joined others in challenging the GDR leadership’s expulsion of Wolf Biermann to West Germany for violating its own promises of cultural freedom. In his later literary work, he turned to the forms of myth and of science fiction both to question his own life and commitments and to criticize the regime; he began to explore questions of identity, modernity, and dialogue as open-ended experiment rather than closed classicism. FÃ¼hmann explored the boundaries of GDR socialism as a real system and an imagined developmental process, not just to engage in ideology critique but also to lay bare the soul of the system—which paradoxically could not be found, despite the opening of the flesh.

This is a fascinating study of the literary records of Eastern European state socialism, which reopens a specific set of experiences and paradoxes that seem at times concealed to many today. Robinson also knowingly or unknowingly replicates the sectarian arguments of Marxism-Leninism, seeming to exclude as “socialism” pretty much everything that Beilharz includes and repeatedly blurring the distinction between fascism and capitalism—replicating, in other words, the claim to exclusive representation of the truth and clear lines of division between friend and enemy so central to Stalinist and post-Stalinist discourse. This replication makes sense if Robinson’s aim is to explore a specific social system as expressed via a specific cultural persona at a specific time. It makes less sense as a general discussion of “Germany’s socialist modernity,” however, and Robinson might well have worked out the precise focus of his argument more

clearly.

After all, the book often seems to suggest that the specific challenges and paradoxes of East German state socialism permit insight into “the future of our own present” (Robinson, p. 11) as well as dialogue with a wide variety of theorists whose direct relevance to the central problem needs to be proven rather than asserted. The text is repeatedly interrupted to insert passages from more than seventy-five complex thinkers and theorists, from Aristotle to Theodor Adorno, Zeno of Elea to Slavoj Žižek. Over and over again, Robinson juxtaposes a difficult passage in FÃ¼hmann to a difficult passage in Georges Bataille or Jacques Derrida or Richard Rorty. Both consist of complicated language in need of elaboration and contextualization to make sense; one passage cannot explain or elaborate the other. Yet as Robinson presents them, either the reader brings the context with him or her to explain the passage, or the reader reaches a bit of an impasse ... and chugs along to the next set of passages. Not only is the writing thereby difficult to follow. In addition, over and over again the writing loses contact with FÃ¼hmann himself. This despite Robinson’s apt assertion that FÃ¼hmann’s work is “saturated with its own particular context” (Robinson, p. 82).

There is something odd about this proliferation of theorists. What is their status? Are they observers of historical process, perhaps solid anchors in a shifting world of signs and images? In other words, do they nail down Robinson’s thesis? Or do they raise a set of problems pointing toward other theses? Or, worst of all, do they simply point to the specific context, the *Denkstil*, as it were, within which Robinson writes—and thereby serve to date the work? Robinson, far from explaining FÃ¼hmann, may obscure him by surrounding him with others, and may make his own important discussions (for example, his lucid discussion of cybernetics in the GDR) less accessible to other scholars.

My complaints about the writing notwithstanding, the book contains a wealth of original and worthwhile insights. Robinson conveys well state socialism’s obsession with its own unresolved process of demarcating itself from the capitalist world, and the paradoxes that thereby arose—especially as some of the key institutions (the concentration camp) and concepts (the plan) appeared in both. He also describes well how the system relied on a notion of a sovereign decision for socialism, that itself seemed to become the content of the system:

in other words, socialism as a system became the effect of an ungrounded decision, thereby calling into question the coherence of socialism as a system. And Robinson shows well how FÃ¼hmann’s autobiographical work reflects on precisely these issues, and how his work, fictional and otherwise, on myth reflected in a parallel way on identity, distinction, and the raw border between self and other. And yet: the writing of FÃ¼hmann that comes through in this book seems ever again to go beyond socialism, to be concerned with something more. The last, long quotation in the book (Robinson, p. 270), for example, from “The Dream of Moira,” is a horrifying image of a muse weaving a cloth of fate encompassing “a nation with all its dead and unborn,” a narrator revealed to be raw, red, flayed flesh, and then “grace” in the form of the cloth surrounding the narrator in “foggy gray” until he or she awakens. Is socialism really the most important context for understanding the text?

From very different points of view and with very different approaches, Beilharz and Robinson both address a similar phenomenon, the ultimate failure of socialism, however defined, to clearly distinguish itself from capitalism. Both clearly implicate socialism in the nightmares of the twentieth century as well: in the camps, in the terroristic communitarianism of Soviet or even Nazi ideology. Implicating intellectual traditions is not, of course, the same thing as identifying them. Neither author is able, by way of the history of theory, to address the complexity of the relationship between state socialism and fascism, for example; such an investigation would have to take place at the level of actual politics, economies, and societies.[2] The history of theory remains important, however, as a description of how intellectuals seek to abstract from social orders and historical processes to conceptualize where they stand. And the place they stand tends to seem a point from which the past and present can be observed with clarity: modernity.

#### Notes

[1]. Detlef Pollack, “Modernization and Modernization Blockages in GDR Society,” in *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-Cultural History of the GDR*, ed. Konrad H. Jarausch (New York: Berghahn, 1999), 27-46.

[2]. Pathbreaking in this regard is Michael Geyer and Sheila Fitzpatrick, eds., *Beyond Totalitarianism: Stalinism and Nazism Compared* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

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