

Preface

This book has taken me longer than most. The subject matter has much to do with it, given the preconceptions, if not the knee-jerk reactions, that are produced by the cypher of ‘Stalin’. Some years ago, I managed acquire a set of Stalin’s works, from none other than a second-hand bookshop in Kansas. Kansas! Yes, for it used to be—many, many years ago—a left-wing, if not Marxist centre in North America. How times have changed. But I soon found that the ‘Works’ were incomplete, ending abruptly in January of 1934. Eventually, I tracked down the remaining volumes, published by Red Star Press in London. Meanwhile, I found the Russian original, which has now been transferred (in online version with page numbers) to the University of Newcastle in Australia, one of my homes. To add to my collection, I became aware in the process of a new edition of Stalin’s works, *Trudy*, which is in the process of publishing what may well be a full collected works by Stalin.

I set to reading Stalin, slowly and painstakingly, as I had done earlier with Marx, Engels, leading western European Marxists, and then Lenin. For some reason, Stalin took me longer, even though he wrote a little less than the others. My earlier hunch that Stalin may actually have something to offer the Marxist tradition was slowly being confirmed, but what that contribution might be took a lot more effort. It required working through the texts many times, seeking to discern the key ideas in light of the frameworks that I was developing. Why? Few had actually worked in such a way, with many simply dismissing Stalin and thereby not even giving him the benefit of serious attention. My starting point with a theological radar meant that I was even more alone. More to the point, I began to realise that many of my assumed categories were being broken down, forcing me to begin thinking again, rethinking everything in the process.

This was, after all, socialism in power, however one may interpret the term. I also realised that socialism in power continues to be chronically under-thought, with many ‘Western’ Marxists simply refusing to countenance the possibility that anything could be learnt from socialism in power—which by 2017 offered a century of immense experiences, stunning achievements, abysmal failures, but above all, an immense resource for reflecting on socialism after the revolutionary seizure of

power. Precisely this reality attracts me so much, especially now with my immersion in Chinese socialism. Stalin is one—although not the only one—of the theorists of socialism in power, whether people like it or not.

As I point out at various moments in the book, it was written largely in the context of China, my second home. I am often here for extended periods of time, especially in Beijing. Initially, I was not so enamoured with the place—too large, too hectic, too much change all the time. But after a few years, I realised why I like the place so much, with all its flaws. It is the centre of the strongest socialist state in world history, eclipsing now the Soviet Union. In the middle of Tiananmen Square, the gate of heaven no less, lies the body of Chairman Mao. Here is socialist power, with a Communist Party in control. It is like a magnet to me and I am working to understand what it means. This study of Stalin is a first step in the process. ‘Stalin and the Theology of Class Struggle’, in *Og Theologie: Festskrift til Carsten Pallesen*, edited by Mads Peter Karlsen and Lars Sandbeck. Copenhagen: Eksistensen, 2016, pp. 315–34; ‘On the Question of Sin: Stalin and Human Nature’, in *The Bible and Critical Theory* 12.2 (2016): 87–103; ‘A Materialist Doctrine of Good and Evil: Stalin’s Revision of Marxist Anthropology’, *Crisis and Critique* 3.1 (2016): 109–54; ‘Against Culturism: Reconsidering Stalin on Nation and Class’, *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 42 (2015): 247–73.

Along the way, many have assisted me with my thoughts, although they are by no means responsible for the way I have developed them. Domenico Losurdo is one, who quietly assures me that we are of the mainstream and that we patiently need to persuade the remainder of their waywardness. Zhang Shuangli is another. We have met often over the years, pushing each other to think further on core questions relating to socialism in power. Zang Fengyu remains a close comrade, urging us both to engage with the burning questions that relate to China today. Lu Shaochen’s efforts to rethink major categories in an original way challenge me to stop and think whether I am working in the most productive manner. Yu Min, through her knowledge of the early years of the Soviet Union, quietly nods when I mention what I thought was a newly discovered idea, for she has found this already in the reality of China. Roger Markwick’s wariness is very much appreciated, as he patiently questions the large topics I enthusiastically tackle, and Tom Griffiths continues to insist on the importance of ‘socialism for the twenty-first century’ from a Latin American situation. To all these I am immensely thankful, as well as those who are too many to mention as I spent the last few years working on this book. Above all, Christina Petterson and I continue our common project, in different parts of the world, for signs of socialism, if not communism itself—in both expected and unexpected corners.

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