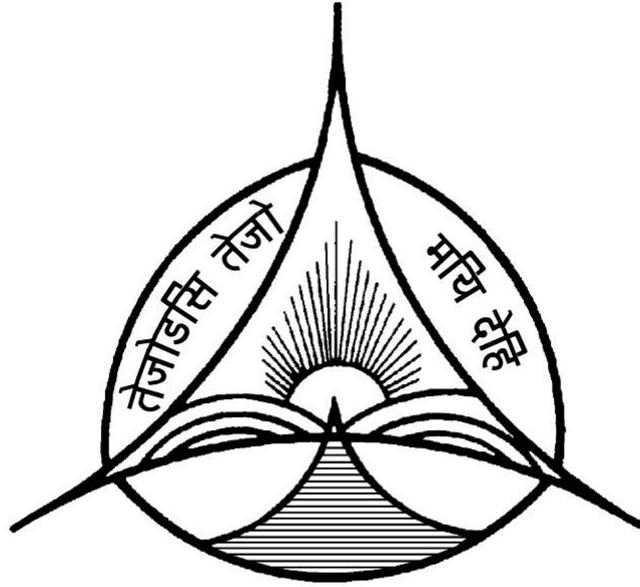


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Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory by Enzo Traverso, Columbia University Press: New York, 2016, pp. 312, \$35 / £26 hb ISBN 978-0-231-17942-3

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In his book, *Left-Wing Melancholia: Marxism, History, and Memory*, Enzo Traverso presents before the reader what may be called a ‘revelation of melancholia’, depicting a series of defeats and fatalities. Consisting of chapters published earlier as separate essays, the book is an exciting narrative that weaves history through political theory, putting forth the disdainful switch of the 20th to the 21st centuries marked by defeats of revolutionary aspirations. In the process, it elaborates the contestations and trials faced by historians, political scientists, cultural theorists—all in order to expand their thinking horizons from the very basic and constraining binaries of revolution–defeat or history–memory or melancholy–polity.

The year 1989 was marked by the fall of the Berlin Wall. This symbolised the essence of socialism in its truest form. It marked not only the end of the Cold War, but also the vision for how communism was framed for a new epoch of political struggle. The book portrays the entire 20th century, ranging from Marxism to psychoanalysis to critical theory, as a period of ‘melancholy’—leading to a critique of the leftist political imagination as well as hinting at a major theoretical lack in the cultural archive of communism. As Traverso points out pithily, ‘new collective hopes have not yet risen above the horizon. Melancholy still floats in the air as the dominant feeling of a world burdened with its past, without a visible future’ (pp. 18–19). He simultaneously argues and maintains that such melancholia was not sudden. It was a characteristic feature of the left’s self-image and, in fact, could be procreative of more revolutionary ideas and struggles and a renewed communist politics of ‘redemption’ despite historical failures. It is the crisis of the left that has opened up the possibility of an emancipatory future, making the melancholia sound more than just pain or sorrow. Traverso traces this idea of melancholia historically, wherein it ranges from being ancient imagination of a bodily disorder to the medieval conception of ‘soul-sickness’. Melancholia becomes different from mourning due to its unaccomplished nature. Something here remains lost forever, an everlasting emptiness. According to Traverso, the present day situation can be seen as an era that suffers from this ‘eclipse of utopias’. In the Preface itself, he lays out a very expansive understanding of Marxist cultural expression. He describes it as ‘a combination of theories and experiences, ideas and feelings, passions and utopias’ (p. xiii).

The theme of melancholy comes out in different ways throughout the book. The missed opportunities of the political left are analysed by Traverso in the form of Marxism and memory studies through the platforms of art, film and the avant-garde Bohemia. To understand the flow, Traverso cleverly crafts the theoretical framework of the book in the first two chapters itself. It is in the first chapter that he elaborates the notion of ‘vanquished’, which leads us to a feeling of melancholy in relation to memory. This, according to him, is the category that includes those who, despite facing defeat, have experiences that should be redeemed. In other words, the defeats of the past lead to possibilities in the future. One comes

across such ‘dialectic of defeat’ in works of thinkers including Karl Marx, Rosa Luxemburg and Walter Benjamin. In the second chapter, Traverso highlights a very fascinating binary of history and memory, wherein he notes history writing as something that involves ‘reconstruction, contextualization, and interpretation of what has happened, a work that inevitably implies a textual re-creation of the past’ (p. 56). He concludes that although one might believe that ‘remembering’ in the ‘Marxist mode’ has faded in the presence of the hues of neoliberalism and change, the chances of its revival still stand strong. The status of being a victim becomes important to remain etched in public memory. It is here that melancholia can lead to revolutionary beginnings. The third chapter is a rather interesting addition to the essays as it explores the left’s mobilisation of the visual or cinematic arts. The October Revolution can be seen as the dawn of a new world in Konstantin Yuon’s famous allegoric painting, *The New Planet* (1921). It depicted victory. A similar shining belief can be seen much later in Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers*. In addition to this, his movie *Burn!* added to his accolades, making him ‘the filmmaker of glorious defeats’ according to Traverso. The 1955 release, *Ulysses’ Gaze of Angelopoulos*, is for him one of the most iconic and haunting depictions of left-wing melancholy. Traverso lays special emphasis on its statue of Lenin that is drifting gradually into the canal. The statue is all dissected and mutilated. There exists a powerful image of the arm that is raised, however definitely not in triumph. Chapter four emerges as an interesting mix from the sociological perspective, as it is based on Marxist writings on Bohemian cultures. For Marx and others including Gustave Courbet, Benjamin, and Leon Trotsky, the peripheral groups of creative people that may include artists and similar cultural cavaliers are the ones who conjure spaces of a melancholic possibility. Bohemia, according to Traverso, was not only an artistic dream in the form of a left-wing utopia. It in fact had the fire of being an active incubator of political action. It is through revolution that the marginal may find its natural accomplishment. It is chapter five that follows the path of Marxism and its failure. There is lament over its defeat in all aspects, from Western Marxism to Black Marxism. In this chapter, one comes across an exploration and deconstruction of Western civilisation and its rationality which may be discerned as self-destructive according to C.L.R. James or Theodor Adorno. It is the relationship of Benjamin and Adorno that forms the crux of chapter six. Their correspondence, according to Traverso, is a ‘human and intellectual testimony’ to the collapse of Europe (p. 179). For the author, it is their connection and communication that can be regarded as a melancholic epitaph of a sad and dismal period in the history of Europe. Benjamin becomes the focus of chapter seven through the works of French Marxist Daniel Bensaid, whose vision and understanding of revolution and utopia are derived from Benjamin’s work. Benjamin’s view of history writing as more than just abstract construction is important. He could witness a crucial intellectual dimension to this writing that led to a political transformation of the present, ‘a new vision of history as catastrophe with a messianic reinterpretation of Marxism as political agency and possible redemption’ (p. xvi). According to Traverso, the present natural order articulated by the so-called liberal regime and market economy actually stigmatises utopias belonging to the 20th century.

The chapters pour out rich cultural–historical insights to the reader. All the essays help Traverso to reiterate and emphasise his idea of revolution through melancholia, while negotiating widely divergent cultural and intellectual archives of the political left. However,

as most chapters were published earlier as separate essays, it would have helped the reader to understand the larger thesis in a more accessible manner if a reworking could have been done to maintain a binding thread of uniformity. It is nevertheless interesting that despite the defeats, Traverso cannot restrain himself from prescribing the imminence of revolution—albeit not as a terminal event of apotheosis. ‘We can always take comfort,’ he tells us, ‘that revolutions are never “on time”, that they come when nobody expects them.’ There thus exists a sweetness, a possibility, a revolution within melancholy. There exists no conclusion of the future. It is within such anxious and uncertain times that Traverso’s *Left-Wing Melancholia* emerges as a beacon of hope that the fear of defeat cannot stop the zeal of revolution and change. The narrative can be seen as a brilliant piece of cultural–historical study and his insistence on the left’s ‘culture of defeat’ is ironically uplifting. When the left feels so exceptionally defeated and deflated today, he reminds us that, in a sense, it has forever been so. There is thus a future-oriented memory. However, this cannot be bereft of a nostalgia which creeps in at every juncture within Traverso’s work. Nostalgia is considered as naïve and the past has had its ugly crumbling.

One may argue that what ‘left-wing melancholia’ does for Enzo Traverso is to produce a feeling of something in the form of a movement wherein one is not sure about its future possibilities, but is aware of the burden that a failed past may carry. Centuries later too, utopia, revolution, communism and barbarism exercise a certain influence over the public memory. However, utopias along with revolutions have turned out to be prone to causing the worst and terrible form and limits of violence. A rethinking of the past created by the left is what this stirring narrative calls for. Traverso perceives ‘the tragedies and the lost battles of the past as a burden and a debt’ as well as ‘a promise of redemption’. The book does wonders for someone who is interested in understanding the contemporary through the lens of the past. It calls for an imaginative vigour of change. Researchers from different scholarly disciplines of political science, history, sociology, cultural history can find their own crucial take-away from the work. In addition to this, the book is worth reading for the one who debunks utopia as well the one who believes in its transformative potential! It is a marker of belief in possibility.

An active engagement with the failure is thus what is called for, leading to replacement of a passive, melancholic remembrance. To be precise, the reality is still replete with echoes of hope and a positive aspiration rather than a traumatic fetishisation of past horror. It is most obvious then, that to move forward, historical errors and defeats are to be dwelt upon. If one has to witness the much-laboured ‘transformation of the world’, it can hardly be without what has been termed in the work as a ‘melancholic bet’. Traverso, through his work, causes a tingling of regret as well as a stimulating aspiration for the political conviction that must follow disappointments in the past. It is important to remember that significance is not of a triumphant revolution, but it is equally crucial to hold on to the memory of those who suffer the consequences of such an accomplished and victorious political action. It is these memories that form history and lead to a future.