

## MARXISM AND UTOPIAN VISION

\*\*\*\*\*

By Michael Lowy

Source: LABOR COLLEGE REVIEW # 9 (New Series)

Victorian Labor College (Carlton South, Melbourne), an independent working class institution established in 1917 and managed by affiliated trade unions.

\* \* \*

THE "CRISIS OF MARXISM" is more a journalistic catch-phrase than a theoretical concept. In certain advanced capitalist countries, much of the left intelligentsia with origins in Stalinism and/or Maoism (with a few isolated exceptions, like Castoriadis) has been deeply affected by the simultaneous unfolding of dissidence in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe (particularly the revelations in Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago) and the crisis of Maoism in China.

They have undergone a severe demoralisation and disorientation, whose main form, especially since the 1970s, is a rejection of Marxism as a "totalitarian doctrine". In many cases, this sudden revulsion has gone even further and has led former leftists into the ranks of the old right, the new right, or the very new, modern right.

It is not accidental that the crisis has been most profound in those countries where Stalinism and/or Maoism exercised pervasive influence among intellectuals --France and Italy.(By contrast, in the past fifteen years, British Marxism has known an astonishing development on the social, cultural and scientific levels.)

Exploited ad nauseam by the mass media in their most superficial form, "new" philosophy and the new "new" ideologues of anti-Marxism are basically the opposite side of the Stalinist coin. Incapable in the past of distinguishing Marxism from its lamentable bureaucratic caricature, these doctrinaires are now simply serving up their old positions with a negative sign lazily attached.

Nevertheless, the anxiety and confusion exhibited by large numbers of these former left intellectuals is a manifestation of a deeper problem: the challenge to Marxism posed by the paradox of its transformation in post-capitalist societies into a state ideology serving an oppressive and exploitative order.

Stalinism in all its varieties is not a "theoretical deviation" (Althusser), but it is one of the most decisive political phenomena in the history of the twentieth century. It is the formation, in societies that have abolished capitalism (in some cases through genuine social revolutions - the USSR and China), of authoritarian, totalitarian states through the use of terrorism.

In these societies, power is monopolised by a social layer - the bureaucracy - with its own interests distinct from and opposed to those of the workers. Rather than a class or a caste, this layer resembles an "estate" (the Stand of Marx and Weber), a clerical and parasitic social order structured through an institution of the politico-ideological type. In the post-capitalist societies, the ideology of this dominant layer originating in the worker's movement is a caricature of Marxism.

The bureaucracy empties Marxism of its critico-revolutionary content and

reduces it to a petrified and hollow shell which it then fills with its own conservative, mystifying and self-serving content.

To explain this bureaucratic degeneration of the post-capitalist states as the product of Marx's theoretical conceptions is about as useful and enlightening as saying that the inquisition was the result of the principles of the Gospel, that the Vietnam war (fought in the name of democracy) was the fruit of the ideas of Thomas Jefferson, or that the German Third Reich was the application of the nationalism of Fichte (or the irrationalism of Schelling or the statism of Hegel).

A serious and respectable critique of marxist authoritarianism does exist. But the capitalist mass media, which has praised the insignificant "new" philosophers to the skies, has never paid any attention to it. It is the critique which anarchists, anarcho-syndicalists and libertarian communists have been presenting for the past one hundred years. We can reject these arguments because they are wrong (which I do), but they are genuine arguments and not publicity stunts.

In my opinion, one of the main contributions brought by Marx to the domain of political thought is precisely the perspective of an anti-authoritarian revolution.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, an authoritarian and substitutionist conception of the revolution predominated among the revolutionary currents of the nascent communist movement (Jacobino-babeufism, Blanquism). The revolution was conceived as the action of a tiny group, a revolutionary elite, which took upon itself the mission of saving the people from slavery and oppression.

These currents based themselves on the essential premise of the metaphysical materialism of the eighteenth century: people were the product of circumstance and, if their circumstance was oppression and obscurantism, the mass of people were condemned to ignorance. The proletariat was thus considered incapable of assuring its own emancipation. Liberation would have to come to it from the outside, from above, at the hands of a small minority, which, as the exception, had succeeded in attaining enlightenment.

This group would now play the role that eighteenth century materialist philosophers had attributed to the enlightened despot: to destroy from above the circular and self-perpetuating mechanisms of the social conditions and thereby enable the majority of people to have access to knowledge, reason and freedom.

In his Theses on Feuerbach and in The German Ideology, Marx broke with the premises of mechanical materialism and formulated the seed of a new vision of the world. Within this vision were the methodological bases for a new theory of revolution drawn from the most advanced experiences of the worker's movement of his epoch (English Chartism, the revolt of the Silesian weavers in 1844, etc.)

By rejecting both the old materialism of the philosophy of Enlightenment (change the circumstances to liberate the people) and neo-Hegelian idealism (liberate human consciousness to change society), Marx cut the Gordian knot of the philosophy of his time. His third thesis on Feuerbach asserts that in revolutionary praxis altering conditions and transforming consciousness go hand in hand. His new conception of revolution (presented for the first time in The German Ideology) flows from this basic premise with rigour and logical coherence. It is only through their own experience in the course of their own revolutionary praxis that the exploited and oppressed masses can

overcome both the external circumstances that chain them (capital, the state) and their previous mystified consciousness.

In other words, the only GENUINE FORM OF EMANCIPATION IS SELF-EMANCIPATION. As Marx would later write in the founding declaration of the First International: "the emancipation of the workers is the task of the workers themselves". The revolution has to be self-liberation. It is defined at one and the same time by radical changes in economic, political and social structures and the achieving of consciousness by the labouring masses about their real interests, their discovery of new, radical and emancipatory aspirations, values and ideas.

The framework for a vision of the revolution obviously related not only to the "seizure of power", but also to an historical period of uninterrupted social transformation. In Marx's vision there is no room for any kind of enlightened despot, whether individual or collective, no Caesar or Tribune of the People.

The doctrine which substitutes the party for the proletariat and imposes its "leading role" from on high, as well as the ideology of the infallible leader, omniscient and benevolent, are a complete rupture with the most profound elements of the philosophy and revolutionary theory of Marx. To find the historical origins of Stalin's, Mao's, Kim il Sung's or Ceausescu's "personality cult" you have to search through religious history or through the customs of oriental despotism. They cannot be found in the thought of the author of The Communist Manifesto.

Events of the 1980s in Poland constitute a decisive stage in the divorce unfolding between the workers in self-styled "actually existing socialism" and the bureaucratic Caesarism that has usurped power in their name. These events have also confirmed two basic theses of Marxism:

1) Contrary to those who rushed to write off the proletariat, the working class has once again shown itself to be the revolutionary class par excellence, the universal class which unites all the oppressed and exploited around its struggle. It appears again as the class that can emancipate itself only by tearing down the entire existing system of domination, the class whose goals can only be attained through democracy, freedom and socialist self-management. This was instinctively understood by the intellectuals, peasants, progressive Christians, students, dissident communists and other social layers who fell in behind the leadership of Solidarnosc to fight against the bureaucratic system.

While it's true that there were clashes inside the movement around very divergent and often confused ideas on what sort of alternative to pose to the established regime, the dominant tendency went in the direction of worker's self-management.

2) The Polish events demonstrated that reform of the bureaucratic state is an impossibility. They showed the structural incompatibility of that state with any degree of workers' democracy and any independent social movement that threatens the foundations of its domination. These events prove the necessity of the anti-bureaucratic revolution, which alone is capable of abolishing the political, social and economic structures of the system and replacing them with genuine socialist self-management. Such self-management means that the workers themselves would determine the priorities and goals of production through a process of free discussion and democratic decision-making. These decisions would not longer be made by a non-elected and all-powerful Bureau of Planning, much less the blind laws of the capitalist market.

Against the hollow and "normative" pseudo-Marxism of the bureaucracy, it is more than even necessary to reassert the utopian revolutionary vision of genuine Marxism. This Marxism has nothing in common with repetitious incantation of a few quotes from Marx or Engels in the style of a typical Buddhist prayer wheel. It consists of a method of critical thought about the social reality with the aim of its revolutionary change.

If, as we believe, Marxism is the "intellectual horizon of our epoch" (Sartre), all attempts to "go beyond" it only end up in regression to interior levels of thought, not beyond but behind Marx. Within this "crisis of Marxism" bourgeois neo-liberalism, positivism, metaphysical idealism or vulgar materialism, social biology and reactionary obscurantism are flourishing. Only the actualisation of Marxism can open the way for a new critique with genuine powers of emancipation.

In our opinion, this process must begin from Marx's own point of departure in 1843 when, in a letter to Ruge, he defined his approach as THE RUTHLESS CRITICISM OF ALL THAT EXISTS. It is a question of utilising the Marxist method, which he defined in his prologues to Capital as "rational dialectic...critical and revolutionary", his radical humanist historicism and his philosophy of praxis in order to understand, interpret and change the world we live in.

This method should be used to understand new phenomena that did not exist in Marx's time, to correct and dialectically overcome his many errors, limitations and weaknesses. In particular, it should be employed to criticise both the regimes and societies under capitalist domination and also the post-revolutionary states which illegitimately lay claim to his thought - all with the perspective of their revolutionary abolition.

This renovation necessarily includes the enrichment of Marxism with the contributions of the new social movements, above all the feminist movement (but also the movements around ecology, pacifism, etc). The integration of feminism as an essential and permanent dimension of the Marxist program - and not a separate chapter tacked on from "the outside" - is a decisive condition for Marxism to achieve a universal and radically emancipating character whose purpose is the abolition of not one but ALL FORMS OF SOCIAL OPPRESSION.

The actualisation of Marxism also requires its enrichment through the most advanced and most productive forms of non-Marxist theoretical thought - from Max Weber to Freud, from Mannheim to Piaget - as well as the integration of the limited but useful output of the various branches of academic social science. Inspiration for this should be drawn from Marx himself, who knew how to make good use of the work of philosophy and science of his day - not only Hegel, Feuerbach and Ricardo, but also Quesnay, Ferguson, Sismondi, J. Stuart, Hodgskin, Maurer, Morgan, Lorentz von Stein, Flora Tristan, Saint-Simon, Fourier, etc.

Marx's use of these sources did not diminish in the slightest the unity and theoretical coherence of his work. The claims that Marxism holds an exclusive monopoly on science, condemning all other currents of thought and investigation, has nothing to do with Marx's concept of the conflictive articulation of his theory with contemporary scientific production.

Finally, the creative development of Marxism and the overcoming of its current "crisis" demands the re-establishment of its utopian dimension. An irreconcilable and thorough-going critique of the present forms of late capitalism and post-capitalist bureaucratic societies is necessary but

insufficient. The credibility of the project of a revolutionary transformation of the world requires the existence of models of an alternative society, visions of a radically different future and horizons of a humanity that is truly free.

SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM MUST ONCE AGAIN BECOME UTOPIAN BY DRAWING ITS INSPIRATION FROM THE "PRINCIPLE OF HOPE" (Bloch) that resides in the struggles, dreams and aspirations of millions of oppressed and exploited, "the defeated of history", from Jan Hus and Thomas Munzer up to the Soviets of 1917-19 in Europe and the 1936-37 collectives in Barcelona. On this level it is even more indispensable to open the door of Marxist thought wide to the gamut of intuitions about the future, from the utopian socialists of yesterday to the romantic critics of industrial civilisation and from the dreams of Fourier to the libertarian ideals of anarchism.

Marx deliberately set severe limits on himself when it came to a utopian vision. He was convinced that preoccupation with the problems associated with the realisation of socialism should be left to future generations. But our generation cannot adopt this posture. We are confronted with post-capitalist bureaucratic societies which claim to be the concretization of "socialism" and even "communism". We have an imperative need for alternative models of a genuine FREE ASSOCIATION OF PRODUCERS (Marx).

We need a Marxist utopia - a heretical concept, but without heresy how could Marxism have developed? A Utopia presents in the most concrete way possible an imaginary liberated enclave not yet in existence (u-topos, nowhere) in which the exploitation of workers, the oppression of women, alienation, reification, the state and capital are all abolished. Without abandoning for an instant the realistic preoccupation with revolutionary strategy and tactics and the very material problems of the transition to socialism, at the same time free rein must be given to creative imagination, to daydreams, active hope and the red visionary spirit.

SOCIALISM DOES NOT EXIST IN THE PRESENT REALITY; IT MUST BE REINVENTED AS THE FINAL OUTCOME OF THE STRUGGLE FOR THE FUTURE. This means encouraging far-ranging discussion within limits or taboos on the possibilities of democratic socialism based on self-management, real democratic planning (in which use values once again predominate over exchange values), non-alienated relations between the sexes, the re-establishment of the balance between humanity and nature and the ecological equilibrium of the planet.

The goal is not to turn out abstract or arbitrary speculation. It is to conceptualise an humane Gemeinschaft that qualitatively differs from the existing state of affairs, beginning with the objective possibilities created by the contradictions inherent in industrial civilisation, by the simultaneous crisis of contemporary capitalism and of so-called "really existing socialism".

Among the utopian elements that should be further explored one could mention for instance:

\* A new productive and technological system, exploring the development and reliance on renewable energy sources, especially those which do not endanger human life or harm the natural environment. The rule under which socialism cannot first take possession of the bourgeois state apparatus and use it for its own purposes, but has to destroy the old structure and build a new one, applies also, although in a different form, to the existing technical and productive apparatus. The present form of industrial mechanism is not the only possible one. It can and should be radically

transformed - replaced by more advanced and less destructive methods of production.

\* The emancipation of labor, not only by the expropriation of the private owners and the control over the process of production by the producers themselves, but also by thorough change in the very nature of labor. This means the abolition of the sexual division of labor and of the traditional separation between manual and intellectual activity, as well as the re-establishment of the qualitative, artistic dimension of labor. Marx criticised industrial capitalism (in the Grundrisse) for its degradation of work: "labor loses all the characteristics of art...(and) becomes more and more a purely abstract activity, a purely mechanical activity." A socialist reorganisation of the work process would require, therefore, the restitution to human labor of its "characteristics of art".

\* The free distribution of an increasing number of goods and services, corresponding to the basic material and cultural needs, and the parallel decline in the role of the market, commodity production and money.

\* Truly equal, non-hierarchical and non-oppressive gender relations, and the universalisation to the whole of society of human values so far restricted to (and imposed on) women: peacefulness, nurturance, altruism, etc.

\* A democratic and decentralised organisation of economic, social and political life, where self-administration and direct control by the workers and the population gradually replace the kind of repressive and bureaucratic structure known as the "state". Even the proletarian, revolutionary state should eventually "wither away" (Engels), its indispensable functions being progressively absorbed by civil society. Planning on a world scale, based on regional and local units, would substitute for the present system of rival nation-states, with their borders, armies, customs, etc.

Independent of polemics with the utopian socialists of his age, Marx's works contain, even if in a fragmentary way, a utopian-revolutionary dimension for which he has always been denounced in the name of "realism" by his academics and reformist critics. One of the characteristics of the social democratic, Stalinist and post-Stalinist impoverishment of twentieth century Marxism was precisely the abandonment of its "messianic" dimension in favour of a restricted and narrow conception of social change. To paraphrase an old formulation of Lenin's, today we could say that WITHOUT REVOLUTIONARY UTOPIA THERE WILL BE NO REVOLUTIONARY PRACTICE.

In the struggle to recover the explosive charge of marxist utopia, we must rely on the underground currents, the heretical and subversive tradition hidden or disowned by the bureaucracy: Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Lenin of State and Revolution and Philosophical Notebooks, the young Lukacs, Gramsci, Walter Benjamin.

Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness (1923) was the most advanced philosophical expression of the principles of the October Revolution. The ideas of Benjamin may well be a source of inspiration for the revolts and revolutions to come.

The starting point and the final conclusion of Benjamin's work - inspired by German romanticism's cultural critique of bourgeois industrial civilisation, but going beyond it from a revolutionary viewpoint - is a critical reflection on progress. His Theses on the Philosophy of History, one of the most important contributions to Marxist thought and revolutionary theory since the Theses on Feuerbach in 1845, stresses that

historical materialism must understand progress in a different way. The technical and industrial development of capitalism, the increasing domination over nature, the blind development of production is not a stream flowing in a naturally inevitable direction (in which we can swim) toward socialism. It is instead a road that can lead to catastrophe, to the destruction of human culture.

A few years after Benjamin wrote his theses (1940), Auschwitz and Hiroshima provided confirmation of the correctness of his warning beyond anything he could have imagined. Today in a world unceasingly threatened by an irreversible breaking of the balance of nature and by nuclear holocaust, Benjamin's ideas have lost none of their pertinence.

For Benjamin, the revolution is not "progress", improving the established order, perfecting the existing economic and social mechanisms. It is a "messianic" interruption of the course of history, of its continuum. Rather than the locomotive of history, the socialist revolution is the emergency brake that brings to a stop the heading rush of the train toward the abyss.

The agent of this revolutionary interruption, the proletariat, carries in its collective consciousness, as an historical memory and as motivation for its revolt, the ageless struggle of the oppressed and defeated. The proletariat is their inheritor and the executor of their estate.

\* \* \*