

The Slovo critique: *socialism utopian and scientific*

JOHN HOFFMAN* - better known to many of our readers as the Communist writer DIALEGO - responds to the debate between Joe Slovo and Pallo Jordan (*Labour Bulletin* Vol 14 No 6 and Vol 15 No 3). He argues that 'backward circumstances' led to a 'backward socialism' which had more in common with the *utopian socialism* condemned by Marx than with the *scientific socialism* developed by him. Scientific socialism builds on and extends the political democracy and liberal rights established by bourgeois democracy - and so the dictatorship of the proletariat should be seen as a *post-liberal state*. In contrast, the backward socialism of Stalin glorified authoritarian, pre-liberal forms of political rule.

Slovo's pamphlet has been widely discussed and generally welcomed. It is in my view a veritable model of a 'discussion paper'. It is courageous and critical. It raises uncomfortable and difficult questions in a searching and open-minded way. Everything, Slovo insists, must be justified anew. We can no longer assume that there are any axioms or assumptions which can be taken for granted - hence the title of the pamphlet: *Has Socialism Failed?*

Indeed since Slovo's

pamphlet appeared, the German Democratic Republic (GDR) - a country with a special relationship with the South African liberation movement - has ceased to exist as a national entity and the USSR itself, the country of the October Revolution, is in the grip of a social, economic and political crisis of truly awesome proportions. It may well be that in desperation, its rulers will introduce some form of capitalism in order to revive its economy and maintain its political cohesion.

The unthinkable dances menacingly before our very eyes. In a situation like this, who can deny the need for the kind of 'no holds barred' critique which Slovo has initiated? It was Marx himself who adopted as his own motto the Latin tag: 'de omnibus dubitandum'. Question everything! This is surely the historical moment for each of us to do likewise.

Have Marxists been overthrown by history?

The British communist journal *Marxism Today* carried

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on its February cover in 1990 a Karl Marx spattered with eggs and tomatoes - the champion of the people now the hapless target of popular wrath. Some contributors to the journal pointed with ill-concealed glee to what they saw as a painful and terrible irony. Marxism, they argued, has fallen victim to its own dialectical processes. It has begun to supersede itself before our very eyes. With the collapse of communist party states in Eastern Europe, Marxism, in a word, has been overthrown by history.

Given the 'shock-waves', as Slovo calls them, triggered by the events of 1989 (p 1), it seems to me that the 'overthrow of Marxism' thesis deserves a considered response. After all, the argument is no more scandalous than the question which Slovo takes as the title of his pamphlet. Unless we can find a convincing reply to those who say that Marxism itself has collapsed with the Berlin Wall and the socialist states, we do not deserve to be taken seriously. For on the face of it, the 'historical petard thesis' appears a plausible reaction to the fate of so many states and parties who have adopted Marxism as their official creed.

Moreover it is an argument which recalls Marx's own criticisms of the "mighty Hegel" - the philosopher whose *idealist* theory of dialectics decisively influenced the development of Marxist thought. For Marx criticised Hegel by basically



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turning his own theory against him. Hegel, we recall, had argued that dialectics exist in both nature and society as an inexorable and universal force for change. The founders of Marxism agreed. But, they contended, these radical premises are contradicted socially by Hegel's conservative view of property, class divisions and the state, and philosophically by the way he ascribed historical movement to the 'labours' of a metaphysical god - a divine creator subject to none of the dialectical processes he supposedly embodied.

Is it possible that Marxism itself has now fallen victim to a similar kind of internal (or, as it is sometimes called, 'immanent') critique? The argument might be presented

as follows. Marxism stands or falls as a theory which is tied to and seeks confirmation in historical practice. "The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is purely *scholastic* question": thus runs Marx's famous second thesis on Feuerbach. Theories, in other words, are not autonomous visions which simply arise in the minds of people. They are mental reflections of the material world. They derive from practice and they guide practice. Theory and practice are inextricably linked.

"Can we simply blame the practise?"

This being so, what then are the implications of the crises and traumas which have afflicted the socialist world since 1989? Ever since the Russian Revolution, 'dissident' Marxists have complained of an apparent gulf between Marxist theory and Marxist practice. Marxism, they argued, is a theory of emancipation and yet (they assert) its self-professed adherents have built societies which are autocratic and repressive in practice. Trotskyists contend that the fault lay with Stalin and the Stalinists. Others have blamed Lenin. In the 1960s and 1970s it became fashionable in New Left circles to insist that the problem had been created by Engels who, it was said, had over-simplified and vulgarised Marx's writing.

By the late 1970s the

French Marxist Louis Althusser (once the great champion of the Marxist classics) could conclude that Marxism itself is in crisis, and disillusioned radicals joined with liberals and conservatives in arguing that Marxism is an inherently autocratic and totalitarian *theory* because the societies which invoke its name are autocratic and totalitarian in *practice*. The Polish philosopher in exile Leszek Kolakowski in a substantial three volume work described Marxism as "the greatest fantasy of our century" and insisted: "Communism realised it [the fantasy - *ed*] in the only way feasible in an industrial society, namely, by a despotic system of government" (Kolakowski, pp 523; 527).

Marxism in other words is not only an oppressive theory but - the argument runs - it stands condemned as such by its own premises. Central to its theory of knowledge is the link it asserts between theory and practice. If then Marxist theoreticians always end up establishing systems which are autocratic and repressive, can we simply blame the practice without at the same time implicating the theory? Marxists - of all people - cannot plausibly argue that theories bear no responsibility for the historical practice enacted in their name.

Central both to Slovo's pamphlet and to the responses which it has already provoked is this basic prob-

lem. If Slovo is to convince with his argument that "the fault lies with us, not with socialism" (p 11), then he must stimulate us to find arguments which successfully refute what I have called the 'overthrow of Marxism' thesis.

The 'argument of circumstances'

In his pamphlet Slovo refers to the fact that socialist theory was applied "in new realities which were not foreseen by the founders of Marxism" (p 11). A number of the responses to his pamphlet make the same point, emphasising in particular the problem of trying to build socialist societies in backward countries. Harry Gwala quotes the words of the late Paul Baran: "socialism in backward and underdeveloped countries has a powerful tendency to become backward and underdeveloped socialism". This, Gwala comments, is the kind of scientific approach we would expect of Marxist-Leninists who employ their tools of dialectical materialism (Gwala 1990, p 40).

I will call this the 'argument of circumstances' since it seeks to explain the apparent gulf between Marxist theory and practice by referring to the hostile and unpromising environment in which real socialist societies had to emerge. The argument is on the face of it an effective rejoinder to the 'overthrow of Marxism' thesis since it explains the

problems, errors, excesses and distortions of the socialist countries with the 'tools' of Marxist theory itself. After all, Marxism itself acknowledges that new societies will necessarily be shaped by the circumstances in which they emerge. Does not Marx say (for example) that a communist society is in every respect stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges?

In other words, the distortions within 'existing socialism' reflect a unity of theory and practice in difficult and unforeseen circumstances. Harry Gwala speaks of the effect which Tsarist autocracy had on Bolshevik organisation; the fact that before World War II, communists in Eastern Europe lived mostly under dictatorships rather than democracies, and they were compelled tactically to form alliances with their own national bourgeoisie and rich peasants. As a result, Gwala argues, the tenets of Marxism-Leninism were somewhat diluted, but (and this is the point) in ways which Marxism itself can adequately explain.

Jeremy Cronin puts particular emphasis on the need to "locate errors within a broad objective situation". He stresses the problems generated by civil war and external invasion, both after the revolution and during World War II. Russia's economic backwardness dramatically affected the

quality of its socialist structures while the isolation of the country meant that it had to extract a surplus from its people - a circumstance which resulted in the massive oppression of the peasants (Cronin 1990, p 98).

Again the point of the 'circumstances argument' is that the apparent contradiction between Marxist theory and practice is explicable in terms of the harsh and hostile environment in which socialist countries had to develop. The 'fault' lies with history. Far from Marxism being hoist upon any historical petard, its explanatory power has if anything been *enhanced* by its capacity to provide a materialist analysis of painful and difficult circumstances.

It is significant however that although Slovo does himself allude to the relevance of circumstances, he is wary of the argument as a response to the traumas of 1989. But why his reservations? If backward circumstances create a backward socialism, doesn't this observation vindicate rather than undermine a Marxist theory of history?

The problem of justification

Jeremy Cronin comments that "in writing his pamphlet, Slovo felt that any historical explanation might seem like special pleading, like an attempt to explain away errors and deviations". As Slovo himself puts it, historical circumstances help "to explain, but in no way justify, the



awful grip which Stalinism came to exercise in every sector of the socialist world" (p 11).

This comment goes to the heart of the problem. I say this because the sharp distinction Slovo makes here between "explaining" historical circumstances and "justifying" them is not as straight-forward as it seems. For Marxists must surely argue that moral positions ultimately derive from a scientific assessment of material circumstances. There are no 'supra-historical' verities to which we can turn - no 'transcendental ideals' which stand outside of the historical process. This is why Marx and Engels insist in the *Communist Manifesto* that "the theoretical conclusions of Communists" merely express in general terms "actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from an historical movement going on under our very eyes". 'Communism' is not an abstract ideal: it is the real movement which abolishes the present state of things.

If we argue therefore that the socialist societies

emerged through painful and difficult circumstances as historically progressive phenomena, then we are not simply *explaining* these circumstances. We are also (at least in a general sense) justifying them as well. What we are saying is this: "We certainly don't like some of the things which have happened in the name of Marxism in the socialist countries and we would not condone such criminal excesses and tactical blunders if they occurred in our own movements. But given the circumstances in which the USSR and Eastern Europe had to develop, how could things have been otherwise?"

Of course the actual way in which events turn out can always be different at the level of detail. Perhaps, Jeremy Cronin notes, a more co-operative approach with the peasantry might have been possible in the 1920s. Both Stalin and Trotsky argued for a "harsh approach to the peasantry" whereas Bukharin took the opposite view. Cronin takes the point pressed strongly by Pallo Jordan that the writings of anti-Stalinists deserve to be seriously if critically read.

But if what happens in general terms is judged to be historically *necessary*, how then can we condemn it? This point emerges particularly poignantly in the case of Pallo Jordan's fierce critique of Stalinism. "It is our task," Jordan says emphatically, "to explain what has led to the atrocities we condemn," and



Joe Slovo

Photo: Anna Zieminski

he takes Slovo to task for identifying the symptoms rather than the causes of the illness (1990a, p 67). But how successful is he in getting round what I have called the 'problem of justification'?

Jordan divides Stalin's critics into two basic camps which derive from the contrasting position of Trotsky and Bukharin. Both Russians accepted that the isolation of the revolution in a backward country created conditions for the emergence of a parasitic bureaucracy. However Trotsky favoured the position supported by the left oppositionist Preobrazhensky, that the USSR would have to industrialise at the expense of the peasantry, whereas Bukharin argued that the worker-peasant alliance should be maintained so that the economy could be developed at a much more leisurely pace. This was a policy debate with momentous historical consequences since once the 'gentler' policies of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (favoured by Bukharin) were aban-

doned, then (Jordan tells us) the Soviet state began to act in a dictatorial manner like the Tsarist state before it.

This raises two points which are relevant to the problem of justification through historical explanation. The first is that Jordan himself acknowledges that Trotsky - although a bitter opponent of Stalin - supported policies which created the conditions for authoritarian rule in general. Indeed, Trotsky had already displayed marked 'Stalinist' tendencies in his argument with Lenin over the trade unions when he favoured militarising the workers. Stalin may have been more successful than Trotsky in combining Marxist rhetoric and Russian nationalism, but there is nothing in Jordan's own account to show that had the USSR developed under Trotskyist leadership, its character would have been fundamentally different. "Once," as he puts it, "the CPSU succumbed to the needs of primitive socialist accumulation, there was no way of breaking the cycle" (Jordan 1990a, p 74).

But what about the policies advocated by Bukharin - greater freedom for small property owners and private enterprise? This brings me to the second point raised by Jordan's critique of Slovo. It is revealing that at no time does Jordan suggest that it have been *better* for the USSR to have continued with the NEP (as Bukharin wanted) than to have em-



Palle Jordan

Photo: Morice/Labour Bulletin

barked on a programme of rapid industrialisation (which both Stalin and Trotsky supported). However even if Bukharin's policies *had* won the day, Jordan argues (I think correctly) that the seeds of the authoritarianism which reached such horrendous proportions under Stalin had already been sown during the civil war and its immediate aftermath, ie even before the decision to abandon the NEP was taken.

The Social-Revolutionaries and other right-wing socialist parties were banned in 1918. Three years later the sailors of the Kronstadt garrison rose in rebellion against what they perceived to be a new tyranny. In March of the same year factions were outlawed in the CPSU and in this way, Jordan comments, "the cancer had been planted in the body of the party". Significantly, as Jordan himself makes clear, both Trotsky *and* Bukharin supported the suppression of oppositional tendencies. His dilemma therefore is this:

His own analysis demon-

states that the problem of authoritarianism and repression arose out of the circumstances surrounding the fate of the Russian Revolution. He claims that the Soviet leadership faced 'a range of alternatives at all the crucial turning points of its history', but in fact he is quite unable to give any indication as to how *under these circumstances*, authoritarian policies could have been avoided. Although hostile to Stalin, he notes that Stalin's approach was supported by the overwhelming majority of Soviet Communists. With the adoption of a strategy of primitive socialist industrialisation, he tells us, the authoritarian die was cast, and yet he appears to support Trotsky rather than Bukharin. Even if Jordan's sympathies are more Bukharinite than we suspect, the point is that Bukharin himself (as Jordan points out) displayed the same willingness as the other Bolsheviks did to crush dissent and opposition.

In what sense therefore can it be said that *under the circumstances* things could have been significantly different? Indeed in one version of his critique Jordan argues that the rise of Stalinism was not inevitable but it was historically necessary. Necessity, he says, implies an element of choice but the choice is not unlimited "for the alternatives themselves are structured by previous choices and inherited circumstances" (Jordan 1990b, p



34). In other words, general trends always manifest themselves through particular (and thus 'accidental') circumstances so that the precise configuration of every event could always have been different. I agree. The same (it seems to me) could also be said about a dialectical view of 'inevitability' as well, but this is just a terminological point. What is significant here is that Jordan concedes that some form or other of authoritarian rule was historically necessary in the USSR after the Russian Revolution.

That being so, how is it possible for him to *condemn* developments which he judges at the same time to be historically necessary? He exhorts South Africans to "rediscover the true meaning of the communist vision" and praises the oppositionists in the socialist world who stood out against the "degradation of the ideals of communism" (1990a, p 74). But the truth is that (from a Marxist point of view) ideals and visions can only emerge from and be realised in concrete historical circumstances, and his own account gives us no reason to

suppose that a significantly less repressive outcome was historically possible.

His historical explanation emphasises the basic circumstances which others have noted and leaves him with the same dilemma. Backward circumstances lead to a backward socialism. It is true that Pallo Jordan is much more critical of Stalin and Stalinism than say Harry Gwala (although Gwala himself finds that Stalin's excesses are "not justified"). The problem, however, is that since he offers no argument to suggest that a radically different scenario could have occurred, it is hard to see how he can extricate himself from the implicit justification embodied in the "circumstances argument".

The dictatorship of the proletariat as a post-liberal state

Up until now we have assumed that the system which emerged in the USSR after the revolution was autocratic and authoritarian in character. Although some Marxists might dispute this, it is (in my view) greatly to Slovo's credit that he calls a spade a spade and does nothing to hide the fact that the Russian Revolution posed serious problems for the development of democratic institutions in the new society.

There may be moments in the life of a revolution, Slovo argues, "which justify a postponement of full democratic

processes" and he feels it necessary to raise (without actually addressing) "the question of whether the Bolsheviks were justified in taking a monopoly of state power during the extraordinary period of both internal and external assault on the gains of the revolution" (p 17). The point is put delicately but the thrust of his argument is clear. Should the Bolsheviks have dissolved the Constituent Assembly in January 1918 when this action led many socialists at home and abroad to condemn the new Bolshevik government as a dictatorship?

Slovo records the fact the Bolsheviks received less than a third of the popular vote when the assembly was elected. The elections took place before October 1917. The assembly only met after the revolution. Lenin argued that as a result the assembly had ceased to be representative of Russian opinion but, as Slovo recalls (pp 14-16), even so significant a revolutionary as the German socialist Rosa Luxembourge disagreed. She expressed grave reservations over the action by warning that "freedom only for the supporters of the government is no freedom at all".

Slovo cites these words and argues that they "may not" have been appropriate in the special conditions which prevailed after the revolution in 1917 since (as she puts it) "without a limitation on democracy", there was no way in which the revolution

could have defended itself in a situation of civil war and massive intervention from outside. The comment is of considerable significance, for in describing the dissolution of the assembly as a *limitation* on democracy, Slovo implicitly challenges the argument which both Lenin and Trotsky used to justify their actions at the time.

For the Bolsheviks did not justify dissolving the assembly as a restriction or limitation on democracy. They presented it as the adoption of democracy in 'a higher form'. The democracy of the soviets was, they contended, a thousand times higher than the old bourgeois democracy as represented by the Constituent Assembly. It was this argument in particular that Rosa Luxembourge criticised. Despite her opposition to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly, she was (like Slovo) prepared to acknowledge that the Bolsheviks might have had a case for limiting democracy in conditions of extreme crisis. What she was, however, unambiguously opposed to, was the way in which the Bolsheviks, as she put it, had made a "virtue out of necessity". They had presented a *limitation* on democracy as though it was a higher form of democracy itself.

But it might be argued that on this matter the Bolsheviks were right and that Rosa Luxembourge was wrong. By suppressing a minority of exploiters, they were creating, as Lenin said at the time, a

"democracy for the majority" on the grounds that a dictatorship for the bourgeoisie is a democracy for the workers. Dissolving the Constituent Assembly, banning opposition parties, restricting freedom of the press etc. did not constitute a 'limitation' on democracy since the suppression of class enemies is itself implied by the very idea of a socialist state as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'.

Slovo is right to be wary of this argument. The truth is that the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as developed in the Marxist classics denotes a form of the state which *builds upon* rather than suppresses liberal political institutions. The classical Marxist view is that democracy under capitalism is inadequate and formal since in itself it does not give workers resources and power. However the political and legal rights which workers do enjoy under capitalism are profoundly important for they serve to educate the class in the meaning of freedom and emancipation. Liberal or bourgeois democracy is described by Marx and Engels as a system which "perfects" the state in the sense that it promises self-government in theory - all citizens are equal in the eyes of the law - and in this way compels the workers to struggle for self-government in practice.

It should be noted that Lenin himself had generally analysed bourgeois democ-

racy in these terms up to around January 1918 - the date on which the Constituent Assembly was dissolved. This is why I would not really agree with Karl von Holdt's argument that Lenin's view of democracy is generally problematic (von Holdt, 1990). Of course Lenin (like Marx and Engels) saw political democracy as 'bourgeois democracy', but he stressed that his democracy was a necessary precondition for socialism itself. It was a system which had to be *transcended* and not suppressed. It was a question of making the 'formal freedoms' of bourgeois society 'real' - not dismissing them as mere fictions to be swept away.

In my view therefore, the classical Marxist conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat must be characterised as a *post-liberal* form of the state. It is a system in which (in Slovo's words) power is exercised "in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people" and which embodies 'an ever-expanding genuine democracy' (p 15). It is a concept which takes for granted freedom of speech and association (freedoms which Marx and Engels defended throughout their political lives) but looks to a deepening of the democratic process so that the mass of the population can begin to exercise real power over their lives.

What happened after 1918? Opposition parties were banned, critics were



silenced, and power became ever more concentrated. The classical Marxist view of proletarian democracy as a *transitional* form of the state - a state dissolving its concentrated powers back into society - ceased to have any meaning. To speak of the withering away of the state in a situation in which this state now exercised (increasingly) autocratic powers seemed absurd and paradoxical. The dismal truth is that 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as it actually emerged after 1917 was less representative - less free and less democratic - than the bourgeois system of democracy it was supposed to have surpassed. It is true that the Bolsheviks were not confronted after February 1917 by a liberal bourgeois democracy. They were confronted by a provisional government that showed alarming signs of veering towards military dictatorship. Nevertheless the suppression of liberal political freedoms in the name of a higher democracy in 1918 led to the tragic polarisation between those socialists who supported Bolsheviks and those who now

called themselves 'democratic socialists' because they opposed 'dictatorship'.

Slovo himself makes the point that Lenin did not address in any detail the nature of established socialist civil society - questions such as the relationship between party, state, people's elected representatives, social organisations etc. But this is not surprising. The 'space' for this kind of consideration was shut out by the development of an authoritarian model of socialism which looked upon 'civil society' (ie, social institutions outside the party and state) as a realm which was basically subversive and anti-socialist in character.

It has to be said (and this is a point at which Slovo himself hints) that the noting of the state as a 'dictatorship' in Marxist theory is a much more complicated and nuanced idea than is sometimes thought. The term 'dictatorship' was only used positively by Marx and Engels in rather unusual contexts where, for example, they were building bridges with authoritarian minded allies whom they wished to placate, or making polemical points against socialists with liberal or anarchist views. The point is that a democratic socialist society is only 'dictatorial' in the rather technical sense that like any society with a state it must 'dictate' to those who threaten to destroy its institutions. A socialist state, however, which 'dictates' in

a way that prevents the members of this or that class from enjoying the classical liberal freedoms of association and speech, ceases to be democratic.

But what happens when such a state represents the majority? Isn't this in itself enough to make it democratic? Those who argue in this way overlook a crucial point. The fact is that a proletariat which suppresses traditional civic freedoms, also suppresses itself, if opposition parties and papers are banned and critics are silenced, how can *anyone* in such a society be said to exercise meaningful democratic rights? Engels once declared that a nation which oppresses another cannot itself be free. The same is true of a class even when its members constitute a majority. A majority which represses a minority (in the sense of the overt repression which developed in the USSR after 1918) can only repress itself since the conditions under which the opinion of the majority can be properly and reliably expressed no longer really obtain.

While it is true that after 1918 Lenin himself began to justify the authoritarian measures of the new Soviet state as the expression of a higher form of democracy, he did so hesitantly and with caution. Stalin, by way of contrast, made a full blooded virtue out of necessity, extolling pre-liberal forms of political rule as though they represented a new and more



Was the 1917 revolution a progressive event?

glorious form of Marxism. It is therefore with Stalin's (rather than Lenin's) name that Slovo rightly associates the model of what he calls "socialism without democracy" (p 3).

The Russian Revolution: a progressive phenomenon?

Those who argue that the revolution produced a repressive and authoritarian society are right to do so. But this point has an important bearing on the problem of justification as noted above - the problem as to how Marxists can criticise developments which are historically inevitable. We have seen earlier how even staunch anti-Stalinists like Pallo Jordan argue that the Russian Revolution (and all that flowed from it) was historically necessary and yet want to vehemently criticise what actually happened as a result.

The problematic character of the society produced by the Russian Revolution makes it necessary to emphasise an important point about the 'circumstances argument' which might otherwise be missed. Marxists do not derive their perspectives from historical events as such. As materialists, we are only obliged to derive ideas from historical *change*. This change is only *necessary* when it reflects itself in historical developments which are *progressive* in character, that is, they take human history to a higher stage.

A number of communists (or 'post-communists' as they sometimes style themselves in Britain) are now arguing that the Russian Revolution itself is to blame for the crisis in the socialist world. The revolution laid the basis (argument goes) for a post-1918 Leninism which developed into Stalinism and

therefore the event represents a disaster (and not a triumph) for the socialist movement. It was not a step forward but a step backward, and therefore Marxists should not feel obliged to 'justify' the event (and all that flowed from it). The revolution fails to qualify as 'a real historical movement going on before our eyes', that is, as a progressive development which makes the case for real communism.

What are we to make of an argument like this? It is certainly worth remembering that even in 1917 there were socialists who opposed the Russian Revolution. Veterans like George Plekhanov and Karl Kautsky argued that Russia was not ready for socialism. The bourgeois revolution of February 1917 had, they contended, not yet created the material and cultural basis for the development of a higher society. To attempt a socialist revolution under these circumstances was therefore futile and self-defeating.

Of course Lenin and the Bolsheviks assumed that the October Revolution would serve as the catalyst to socialist revolutions in the 'developed' West and no-one anticipated that the revolution would find itself isolated in a backward country. But given the fact that this isolation did not occur, we have to ask the question: under *these* circumstances what kind of socialism could emerge? The problem of democracy after

1918 is itself part of a wider problem - the question of when the development of a socialist society actually counts as a progressive rather than a reactionary phenomenon. The point is not as bizarre as it sounds.

In Part 3 of the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels review a wide variety of other socialist and communist doctrines prevalent at the time. One factor in particular differentiates these socialisms and communisms from the argument advanced in the *Manifesto*: the attitude towards capitalism. Non-Marxist socialisms, the *Manifesto* argues, either take an uncritical and reformist view of capitalism, or even worse, they take a position towards capitalism which is reactionary in character. Reactionary socialists (as the *Manifesto* describes them) look backwards by expressing support for pre-capitalist ideas of a medieval kind. Communism in this view is not a *higher* form of society which builds upon the technological achievements and political culture of the capitalist system. It is merely a (backward looking) moral ideal or utopia which shuns bourgeois ethics and practices. It is a reactionary or "crude" (as Marx and Engels sometimes call it) communism because it projects socialism as a system of shared poverty rather than as a system which utilises and builds upon capitalist abundance.

It is surely not difficult to identify elements of this

"crude communism" in the institutions and practices of existing (or formerly existing) socialism. Slovo himself refers to the "primitive egalitarianism" which reached lunatic proportions under the Pol Pot regime, the absence of cost accounting, a dismissive attitude to commodity production, the premature abandonment of market forces, and a doctrinaire approach to questions of collectivisation (p 22).

While we are right to criticise these developments, it is important to be clear about their character. They are not, strictly speaking, deviations from socialism as such. What they are (as Marx's own writings make clear) are deviations from a *particular kind* of socialism - namely a *scientific* socialism - a socialism which seeks to build upon and thus move beyond the capitalist system. A scientific socialism is a progressive socialism because it seeks to transcend capitalism. A socialism which simply *rejects* capitalism on moral grounds and sets about suppressing the market by force accords with the kind of socialism which the *Manifesto* calls reactionary. In this sense Harry Gwala is right to argue that backward circumstances create a backward socialism. But the implications of this comment are grave indeed.

For the *Manifesto* makes it clear that a socialism which is simply anti-liberal and anti-capitalist is very different from socialism which

is post-liberal and post-capitalist in character. The one builds upon capitalism and its achievements, the other merely 'negates' or rejects it. The one harnesses the energy and dynamism of capitalism - its technology, its liberal culture, its scientific achievements - and puts them to progressive use. The other simply rejects capitalism by seeking to impose autocratically crude communist norms so that (and this is the really uncomfortable point) individuals become even less free - even further away from human emancipation - than they would be under a system of liberal capitalism.

Slovo refers to "episodes of direct compulsion against producers" in the development of socialism after 1917 - the forced collectivisation in the 1930s, the extensive use of convict labour as a direct state and party exercise (p 22). It is true that capitalism had its own period of primitive accumulation in which the system comes into the world dripping blood and gore, and South African democrats for their part know only too well how capitalists can for long periods of time support and connive with colonial and racist forms of rule. Nevertheless if we want to understand the popular uprisings in Eastern Europe in 1989 and the current crisis in the USSR, then we need to confront the painful fact that individuals can enjoy greater freedom under liberal capitalism than they do under a form of autocratic



socialism which involves the "direct compulsion of the producers".

Under capitalism, as Engels put it, "the principle of freedom is affirmed" and the "oppressed will one day see to it that his principle is carried out" (*Collected Works* 4, p 474). But what happens if under *socialism* the principle of freedom is dismissed as a bourgeois prejudice (ie, it is not affirmed at all), and workers find themselves subject to the kind of direct coercion characteristic of pre-capitalist systems? What is historically progressive about that?

Our problem therefore is this: given its tragic isolation, the Russian Revolution brought into existence a system which displayed at least some of the features of what Marx and Engels would have identified as utopian rather than scientific socialism. These features were characteristic of a reactionary rather than progressive socialism - an autocratic rather than a democratic socialism - a socialism thus dramatically at odds with a scientific socialism which is necessarily post-capitalist rather than pre-

capitalist in its political and economic character.

Marxism and solidarity: the dilemma of a democratic socialism

The painful question now arises: should Marxists have followed Plekhanov and Kautsky and refused to have supported the Russian Revolution at all? Should they have identified themselves body and soul with a socialism which turned out to be reactionary rather than progressive in significant respects?

I think that we are right to pose this question but we are also right to think long and hard before we answer it affirmatively. Because the men and women who sacrificed so much to build socialism in the USSR were acting with great selflessness and courage. Workers all over the world were inspired by their example. As a result of the revolution, millions of people fought for freedom and equality who would not otherwise have had the confidence and courage to do so. Rosa Luxemburg, though sharply critical of Lenin's tactics, was to say of the Bolsheviks that they went ahead as an example to the proletariat of the world by crying out "I have dared!" (1972, p 251). This, she argued, is what is "essential and *enduring* in the Bolshevik policy" and "and in *this* sense, the future everywhere belongs to 'Bolshevism'".

Can Marxists really call themselves revolutionaries

unless, like Rosa Luxembour, they feel compelled to express solidarity with those who seek to build a better world? It is true that revolutions may occur under circumstances in which heroic efforts are likely to fail. To "carry out", Rosa Luxembour declared, "the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist revolution in a single country surrounded by reactionary imperialist rule and in the face of the bloodiest world war in human history - that is squaring the circle" (1972, p 242). It was a venture which she believed was tragically doomed. Was she wrong therefore to support it?

The problem is not a new one for Marxists although it has to be said that with the Russian Revolution it was a problem which took on a particularly acute form. For crucial to Marxism as a scientific socialism is the argument that people are educated, and can only really be educated, by material circumstances themselves. This is a philosophical point with critical political implications. The *Communist Manifesto* makes it clear (as we have seen) that the theoretical conclusions of Communists are not invented by reformers but spring from the historical movement 'going on before our very eyes'. This is why Marxists are implacably opposed to conspirators and elitists - to those who believe that they can manipulate events or act paternalistically on behalf of people. As far as



Marxists are concerned, the materialist argument for circumstances is also a political argument for democracy.

But it is here that the problem arises. For the fact that people are educated by circumstances (and are not 'enlightened' by paternalistic leadership from on high) inevitably means that people will from time to time (Marxists included) find themselves in circumstances which are not of their choosing. Under such circumstances they may be 'compelled' to take actions which they know (or which they should know as long as they remain Marxists) are necessarily problematic in character. Thus Engels told the German socialist Joseph Weydemeyer that "we shall find ourselves compelled to make communist experiments and leaps which no-one knows better than ourselves to be untimely" (cited by Levin 1989, p 69). Marxists are part of the historical processes they try to understand and like everyone else, they have to learn from their mistakes. Only 'utopian socialists' believe otherwise.

It is true that Marx and En-

gels for example *tried* to distance themselves from those who raised communist demands during the (bourgeois) democratic revolutions of 1848. But they were not wholly successful. There is evidence to suggest that some of the formulations during this period were made by Marx and Engels not out of theoretical conviction but in order to cement tactical alliances with other socialists who were impatient at the pace of events. Thus the argument in the *Communist Manifesto* that a backward Germany (as it was in 1848) might experience a proletarian revolution "immediately" following on from a bourgeois revolution, is difficult to square with the *Manifesto's* general analysis of how workers become class conscious. It is also contradicted by other comments Marx and Engels make at the time where they envisage the "permanent revolution" as a much more protracted process.

But why should contradictions of this sort arise? An even more dramatic example is furnished by the uprising of workers in 1871 leading to the formation of the short-lived Paris Commune. Marx and Engels were opposed to the uprising since they considered that under the circumstances it could not possibly succeed. Paris was ringed by the troops of an invading German army which would inevitably assist the French government (which had retreated to Versailles) to

restore 'order'.

But when the uprising did occur, how did Marx and Engels respond? Did they complain that because the uprising was 'untimely', they would therefore have nothing to do with it? Did they use the occasion to deliver (in a schoolmasterly Menshevik fashion) a severe reprimand to the communards for taking destiny into their hands before the material conditions for political success had come to fruition? The creators of Marxism did nothing of the kind! As the *Civil War in France* demonstrates, they felt compelled out of a sense of solidarity to present the Commune as the heroic attempt by ordinary men and women to "storm heaven" and lay the basis for a future communist society.

The workers, Marx writes of the communards, "have no ideals to realise" but "will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men" (1971, p 76). For this is the point. People have to make history for themselves. They can only learn from their own experience and therefore from their own mistakes. It is significant that Rosa Luxemburg defends the Russian Revolution in the same way and for the same reasons that Marx and Engels support the Paris Commune.

It is also revealing that the German socialist, Eduard Bernstein should find Marx's comment about "ideals" to be either "self-deception" or "a

mere play on words on the part of the author" (1961, p 222). For Bernstein and his fellow 'revisionists' had ceased to believe that a revolutionary reconstruction of society was either possible or desirable. They did *not* think that people must do things for themselves and therefore identified themselves as liberal rather than *democratic* socialists in their opposition to revolutionary developments.

Slovo makes no attempt (he tells his readers) "to answer the complex question of why so many millions of genuine socialists and revolutionaries became such blind worshippers in the temple of the cult of the personality" (p 12). But at least part of the explanation surely lies in the tension just noted between the logic of Marxism as a scientific socialism and the pressure of circumstances which compels revolutionaries to undertake experiments of a 'utopian' kind. It is true that the Paris Commune lasted only for a few months and did not undertake any unambiguously authoritarian measures in its defence. But what if, against the odds, it *had* maintained itself in power through the introduction, say, of a draconian authoritarianism and the consolidation of Stalinist style personality cults? How would Marx and Engels have reacted then?

The USSR did survive. It weathered the fierce onslaughts of counter-revolution and Nazi attack. It

involved millions of its citizens in the construction of a new social order. It inspired millions elsewhere at a time when fascism had strangled the Spanish republic and capitalism was crippled by slump. "I have seen the future and its works". The utopian character of the USSR was apparently belied by its practical successes and the popular support which Stalin enjoyed. Moreover the capitalist countries remained bitterly hostile to the USSR so that it seemed that criticism constituted treachery to the makers of a new world. George Orwell continued to regard himself as a socialist but his fierce attack on Stalinism in *Animal Farm* and *1984* was, it is said, worth a cool million votes to the British Conservative party in the postwar period.

The need for solidarity can pose grave dilemmas for democratic socialists, and reflects the fact that the tension between scientific socialism and circumstances which generate utopian perspectives and practices is a real one. It is a tension which arises because Marxism as a scientific socialism sometimes has to face in two directions at one and the same time. Precisely because our values are rooted in the 'historical movement going on before our very eyes', Marxists cannot analyse society in terms of timeless 'values' which stand outside the historical process. If this is its enduring strength, it also creates prob-

lems. For what happens when there are circumstances (as in the case of the Russian Revolution) which compel Marxists to act in ways which are contrary to the 'logic' of their own theory? We then have to witness the tragic spectacle of Marxists (as with Lenin after 1918) defending the indefensible and trying to justify what cannot be justified.

The problem is therefore, as Slovo says, a "complex" one. The contradictory relationship between Marxist theory and Marxist practice - between a scientific logic and utopian circumstances - arises as part of the historical process itself. Marxists are subject to the same historical circumstances which compel humans in general to "enter social relations independent of their will". Long historical processes have to be endured in the struggle for human emancipation. These processes involve heroic leaps and untimely experiments. They are also contradictory in character for they require Marxists to organise politically and support coercive state institutions in order to reach a world in which the state and (hierarchically organised) politics itself will disappear.

The lessons of 1989

There can be little doubt (as Slovo acknowledges) that the prestige and credibility of Marxism has been seriously damaged by the fact that a "socialism without democracy" has been created in the



name of Marxism. This has generated a sense of theoretical 'crisis' as our critics gleefully proclaim that Marxists have been overthrown by history.

On the other hand the rise of unpopular and autocratic states can only be understood in Marxist terms as developments which are radically at variance with the logic of a scientific socialism. The collapse of these states demonstrates beyond all shadow of doubt that utopian forms of socialism are unworkable and ultimately unpopular (even if they are not without some progressive features like the desire for peace and the solidarity given to national liberation movements).

Circumstances imprison but they also liberate and the events of 1989 have helped to liberate Marxism from the tragic strait-jacket of circumstances placed upon it after 1917. The popular revolutions in Eastern Europe have made it possible to point once again to historical developments as a vindication of the logic of Marxism (however painful and unwelcome this vindication is).

The tensions between theory and practice remain inherent in the historical process but we are now in a position to answer our critics with a confidence and a conviction that was not possible as long as we believed that we had to defend the problematic legacies of 1917.

In a word: Marxists no longer need to make virtues out of necessities. This, it seems to me, is the real lesson of Slovo's courageous critique and it is the reason why socialism does indeed have a future. ☆

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