

THE 'NEW WORLD ORDER' – AND 'OLD WORLD' DISORDER

Malevolence has been gratified by the errors they have committed, attributing that imperfection to the theory they adopted which was applicable only to the folly of their practice.

Mary Wollstonecraft*

The Betrayal of a Russian Dream

In the year 1992, when one-time Marxists are busy chasing their tails and claiming that their Gods have failed them, we must point again to that profound truth of Mary Wollstonecraft. Those who now repudiate the theories they once held as erroneous or imperfect, either misunderstood the Marxism they claimed to follow, or they deliberately perverted Marx's teachings. They altered the meaning of Marx and his close collaborators, they lied in order to justify the crimes of the USSR, and they assisted in preventing the development of socialism. Now, in an effort to resurrect their claim to honesty they shift the folly of their practice to the theory itself. It is only because some sections of the old Communist Party still have a grip on a section of the working class – and this is certainly the case in South Africa – that it is essential that their falsehoods be exposed. Also, it is still necessary to protect those who follow them unwittingly. In the short space available we offer this sketch of events over the past seventy years in the belief that there are still people who can hear and will listen.

Seventy four years ago the Bolshevik Party took power in Russia and set as its goal the establishment of an international socialist society. But that did not ensure stability. First they accepted the most humiliating terms and signed a peace treaty with Germany in order to extricate the state from a disastrous war. Then they routed armies financed by the capitalist west and tried to reach the German borders to win the western workers to their dream of a free society. Next they organized a Communist (or Third) International (Comintern) and a Red international of Labour Unions (Profintern), to unite the workers of the world in a revolutionary movement. Faced by their need to escape from isolation, and seeking support for their beleaguered state, the Bolsheviks extended the hand of friendship to the colonial people, to the workers, and to intellectuals everywhere.

Reality did not favour the Bolsheviks. Conditions inside the Soviet Union deteriorated. There was a cholera epidemic, drought and starvation. The Kronstadt sailors rose in rebellion and the command economy organized under war conditions was replaced, under duress, by a free market of farm produce. Nor did the international movement prosper: the communist regime in Hungary collapsed (and in this General Smuts had a role to play as an envoy of the western powers), and the German revolt of 1923 was misconceived and bungled. The Comintern never rallied large movements, the Profintern was always peripheral to the working class movement. Also, within a few years it became obvious that: The socialism of many Bolsheviks was not unalloyed with corruption; the Red army contained many careerists; the Comintern became a centre of intrigue. The Bol-

shevik party had failed to develop an active tradition of democratic dissent and after the death of Lenin the already fragile unity of the party was seen to have depended on the authority of one man. Without Lenin the party became increasingly narrow and restrictive; the tenuous practice of debate and discussion came to an end; and the purges got under way.

There were two distinct faces presented by the cabal that ruled the USSR in the late 1920s. The outside world saw a facade of socialism. The men and women of the 'socialist motherland' were happy and contented, building a new society, establishing a new 'proletarian' culture, and still finding time to sing the praises of the great father of the nation: Josef Stalin. This picture of great construction and achievement was accepted by sympathisers in five continents; by intellectuals and journalists; by trade union officials, by churchmen and by ambassadors.

Inside the USSR the situation was seen differently. Fear stalked the land as millions were uprooted in forced collectivisation, hounded or killed, arrested and never seen again. A new elite emerged, took government jobs, monopolised the scarce resources, and established their family's rights to education, health facilities or holiday homes. Not a bourgeoisie because the laws of capitalism did not operate, but a highly privileged set, claiming the legitimacy of a revolution they had destroyed. And yet this very elite was constantly shaken by fresh arrests, fresh trials and executions. While they survived they carried out central commands that reduced the population to servility: to a system of law that served out unjust sentences; to forced labour in the vast prison camps that became known to the world as the 'gulag'; to labour on the land and in the factories that paid subsistence wages; and to a system of deprivation that made a mockery of the word socialism. This was recorded in documents, histories and novels — but these were suppressed inside the USSR and, even when published abroad, ignored by friends of the Soviet Union and by the liberal establishment.

Yet, it was this gigantic lie that members of the communist parties, and of front organizations across the world celebrated, as the model of a 'New World' and as the defender of the rights of all humanity. In its name, men and women, some honestly, others falsely, claimed to represent socialism. And heaven help those who disagreed. Dissidents were hunted out, slandered, harassed and even killed.

This is not the place to chronicle seventy long years of increasing tyranny. What is surprising is not that it collapsed, but that it survived through to 1991. Even as it approached its end, after years in which it was widely known that the economy was collapsing, and that the USSR was unable to match the technological advances of the more advanced capitalist countries, the system survived. In the thirties and forties the Soviet state rallied international and local support because of the threat of fascism; in the fifties it appeared (falsely as we now know) to be the harassed victim of the 'cold war'; and even when it was exposed as a force of counter-revolution (e.g. in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968) the myth was maintained that the USSR was a socialist (or at least a workers' state), and its followers celebrated its 'great victories'. For those who realised what was happening the words 'communism', as associated with Stalinism and/or the USSR, was a degraded word.

Leon Trotsky, with the assistance of only a small band of followers, was exceptional in keeping alive the original message of the October revolution. His continued exposure of what was happening in the USSR, even when he erred, placed him high above others who remained silent or even lied about events in the USSR. The recent spate of confessions only help condemn them the more for their long silence.

The Calumny of the Capitalist world

Stalinism can only be understood as the collapse of the Soviet ideal before the counter-revolution in Europe in the early 1920s. The success of Bolshevism in Russia was fragile. This was a country that had been dragged into capitalist relations by the investment of finance capital in the large scale industries in a few cities and in the construction of a national railway system. But a large part of Russia was barely touched by the new economic relations. It was that which made it relatively easy for the Bolsheviks to take power in this state, but harder for it to build socialist society. Then after the shattering civil war of 1918–20 and the isolation of the USSR, the revolution was usurped by a party cabal. In condemning Stalin and the people who collaborated with him, we also condemn the western bourgeoisie who did their utmost to destroy the new Soviet Union. That, indeed, was their response to the first revolution that had firmly rejected capitalist relations.

Although it had struck a near-mortal blow at the young socialist state, western capitalism also went through its darkest hours in the 1920s and 1930s. While dominating the world and draining the resources of its dependencies, the ruling class presided over massive inflation; induced mass starvation in the heart of Europe and elsewhere, leading to the depression that spread across the world in the late 1920s; nurtured and extolled fascism and watched undisturbed over the rape of Ethiopia, the destruction of republican Spain, the onward march of Japan in the east and Nazism in Europe, and allowed or encouraged racism and xenophobia. The working class across five continents suffered mass unemployment and unbearable living conditions, seemingly unable to find the means to smash their oppressors.

Once again it was left to small bands of people to raise the banner of protest — against colonial degradation, against fascism and mass genocide, against immiseration and then mindless war. Socialists like Trotsky were unique in having warned against fascism in Germany or Italy, against the rising militarism of Japan, or against the tragic consequences of Comintern policy in China and in Spain. Perhaps he should have done even more. He failed to train a cadre able to add to the store of Marxist theory, and his own insights were dulled under the stress of Stalinist persecutions. Himself almost penniless, with no apparatus through which to reach the world, he and his comrades did enough to put the world to shame. If they were over optimistic in their predictions they must look partly to their own errors, but it must also be said in their defence that they were execrated and that their voices were dimmed by obstruction of the big battalions of Capital and of Stalinism.

Then came the war, starting in China in 1931, extending across Africa and Europe in 1935–38 and then spreading across the earth's surface in 1939–45. Whatever sins are laid at the feet of German, Italian and Japanese war lords, and for that they cannot be forgiven, the cowardice, the perfidy, and the treachery of the leaders of western Europe, the USA and the USSR, were necessary counterparts to fascist bestiality. It is doubtful whether we will ever know the cost in human lives. This was a nightmare that surpasses all previous wars with mass genocide, mindless destruction and the killing of millions. It was from this war that the world emerged with new masters: the two 'super-powers' USSR and USA; the satellite powers of western Europe (Britain and France); and the honorary position given to the China of Chiang Kai-Shek. Yet the war weakened the western victors and the USSR, sheltered behind the resources of its new satellite states in eastern Europe, seemed for a time to be one of the giants. In fact two new economic goliaths emerged: the two defeated nations — Japan and Germany. It is now the three financial giants, Japan, Germany and the USA that dominate the world's economy.

The balance of economic dominance had shifted but the rest of the world remained in penury. Even western Europe was on the dole and depended, at least initially, on US handouts. The one-time colonies, now 'liberated' politically, regressed economically, making little or no headway in developing their resources. Only a few centres on the Pacific rim (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) were exceptions. But they were exceptions which thrived under US protection or because they had open markets to which they could export their goods. In general the rest of the world stagnated, or was dependent for brief bursts of economic development on the goodwill of their economic over-masters. That is, their advancement depended on foreign investment, on the availability of markets, and on the stability of the stock exchanges of Tokyo, Bonn and New York.

Of course this is not the complete story. There were exceptional regions of progress for at least some of the time, and in a few regions outside the most favoured regions. However, whatever successes there were — and there was a prolonged boom that lasted over twenty years after the end of the war — capitalism has not, and cannot overcome its inherent instabilities. There have been crises and recessions, major financial collapses and growing unemployment. The peace of the world has been shattered in local centres, eventuating in the war on Iraq, which demonstrated the killing power available to the armed forces. The world, in this one respect has not changed. What has altered has been the collapse of the USSR, now the USS (Union of Sovereign States) but destined to separate and become the new SS (Slav States). This is more than the kind of collapse the world experienced in the past, as national groups raise the old banners of intolerance: of national autarky, of religious sectarianism, of squabbles over borders and the levies of armed men. With modern armaments freely available, the destruction that can be wrought by the smallest armies can be devastating as is obvious from warring Yugoslavia, that one-time 'communist' state that formerly won the support of so many communists and trotskyists.

The greatest misfortune is undoubtedly the collapse of the international socialist movement and the failure of the working class to build effective organizations with which to counter the capitalist offensive. It is precisely this paralysis of the working class that gives the USA, Germany (and Japan?) a free hand to do as they like in imposing their will on the rest of the world. It was not only eastern Germany that was ingested by its richer neighbour. Capital stands by to take its pickings from the old eastern bloc.

This is the base of the 'New World Order' declared so casually by President Bush. It is a parody of the 'New World' that the Bolsheviks dreamt of in 1918. They won the right to this vision through the revolt of the workers and peasants: Bush drummed up his vision after sending his laser directed bombs against a petty (if nasty) dictator. Despite its relatively weakened world economic role, the phrase was his declaration of US hegemony. Its reality stems from the fact that there is no obvious rival to US military power. Here is the realization that the US has the force that can dictate terms to the recalcitrant or the unmoving. In the process a kind of peace can be established in southern Africa, in the Middle East, and also in other areas where the US needs an end of hostilities to regenerate trade and investments. Nor is this just griping. The peace that is being imposed is designed to stop real change in the troubled regions of the world.

The issue that socialists must face is the relative inability of the working class to oppose these events, even if this is only over the short term. Without a social force to back their demands, socialists remain impotent. All attempts at change seem to come from voluntarist groups; all large scale demands remain unanswered because the force that is required to give flesh to such demands remains inert.

If we believed that this was the 'end of history', we would quietly close up shop, and (for those of us who had the means) would 'eat drink and be merry...for tomorrow, (inevitably), we die'. Yet it must be declared: this is a passing phase. It might last over several years but cannot endure. The contradictions in capitalism will force new elements to rise. Perhaps not in the way expected over the past five decades, but rise they must. Meanwhile there are task for socialists that will demand all their resolve and energies.

The problem is not to find issues that must be taken up, but to single out the most important. If socialism has to take on new meaning and find an international response, there has to be fresh thinking about the tasks we set ourselves, and organizational approaches that reject the guru-led hierarchies of the past. Without at this stage trying to demarcate the most important tasks facing socialists everywhere, the following seem to be more than most small groups can achieve. But they must consider some of the following tasks:

There is the need to protest against further warfare – whether global, regional or local. There are human and civil rights that must be protected in the name of a democratic socialism that must incorporate the needs of the low, the poor, and the deprived. There is a continual struggle against racism and discrimination at the work place and in the community – and a renewed mobilisation against the rising groups of fascist thugs. There must be a struggle against unemployment, against

low wages and against labour discrimination. Added to these there are struggles in every country related to education, health, and discrimination of any description.

However, socialists in South Africa and elsewhere cannot conduct such a programme of demands unless they first set their own houses in order. There has to be an end to the organizational centralism that denied the membership the right to open dissent. There must be both socialist education and the encouragement of innovatory ideas. But above all there must be a condemnation of harassment or witch-hunts inside socialist groups, whether on grounds of ethnicity or gender, and an end to dehumanizing practices. There cannot be, and must not be, any justification for imprisonment, torture or executions of members – either inside societies that claim to be socialist or in the movements that claim to be working for socialism. The violations of common justice that we have recorded in *Searchlight South Africa* in Swapo and in Umkhonto we Sizwe, and similar activities in the PAC that have still to be disclosed, involving the violation of democracy and of elementary human rights, are unacceptable. The failure of socialists to condemn these actions follows in the footsteps of those who remained silent over the crimes of Stalinism in the USSR.

It is with regret, if not anger, that we must condemn so many of the old organizations for framing grandiose programmes that they were incapable of pursuing. However, they are not as guilty as the communist parties that set out deliberately to lead the working class astray. Their programmes were criminal and left three or more generations without hope. It is now time to start again and prove afresh to millions of people that socialism is about human rights and transforming society, and that we have the ability to right the most serious wrongs. From that other matters can follow.

* *A historical and Moral Review of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution*, 1794.

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