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# SOCIAL JUSTICE

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## MARXIST VERSUS REVISIONIST CONCEPTS OF SOCIALISM

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# MARXIST VERSUS REVISIONIST CONCEPTS OF SOCIALISM

John Horton

The concepts that I want to bring out in a theoretical way are totally embedded in the project which Marlene Dixon has laid out. (See "Varieties of Socialism," above.) These concepts, such as economism, constitute theoretical as well as political barriers to our understanding of socialist construction and of the uneven development of socialist construction. Or to put it another way, these are revisionist concepts. They come from petty bourgeois class interests, and they are opposed to the Marxist concepts which we think are valid for proletarian socialism.

First, I want to make one methodological comment, because I am speaking within the realm of sociology and yet not really talking sociology. I may be mistaken for talking sociology in the sense that I am stressing concepts. You know that sociological practice means dealing in concepts and constructing models for the sake of constructing models, a sort of an accumulation process for which one hopes for some reward at the end. In other words, sociological thinking comes out of the material practices of sociology. These practices lead, on the one hand, to model-building and idealism, and on the other hand, to what Mao called empiricism—substituting observable facts and experience for theory. I want to point out that these tendencies, which are very normal in sociology (because they express the interests of the class of people who are sociologists) also get reproduced as deviations or revisions within the workers' movement. Why do they get reproduced there? It is not simply a matter of bad thinking; they get reproduced because they represent the interests of those forces within the workers' movement which we have been talking about, that is, the forces that would support state welfare capitalism and state welfare socialism.

There are two kinds of deviations within the left, which have their ideological and class counterparts in bourgeois sociology. One is idealism. We can recognize it in the ultra-leftist approach to socialism. It is

clearly idealistic because the concept of socialism, whatever variety of socialism, is derived from some ideal model. As Marlene said earlier, it's like "forever waving the flag of workers' control" without ever paying attention to such concrete problems as the need to develop the forces of production and survive in a capitalist world-system. So our ultra-leftists have their perfect model of socialism, so perfect that it is never realized in practice. Thus they are forever in opposition. That is why we probably do not have to say very much about ultra-leftist models. They are rarely dominant, because they are usually outside of practice and in opposition to practice (but not always).

The dominant tendency, both in sociology (not surprisingly) and the left, is empiricism. What is the empiricist error? Stated simply, empiricists derive their theory from "whatever is, is right." So if socialism and socialist construction, for whatever historical reasons, are developing in countries that are backward from a technological viewpoint, then it is not very surprising that theories generated from this experience claim that socialism means above all the development of the forces of production. This is an economistic position, the result of an empiricist method which generalizes and theorizes from a particular, historical experience. That experience is not necessarily valid for us.

So how do we counter empiricism? In thinking about the whole question of proletarian vs. petty bourgeois socialism, we do not simply return to model-building, to idealism. We think about socialism within the dialectical practices of Marxism and Leninism. When we link socialism and practice, we are saying simply that Marxist concepts of socialism were created in class struggle. For instance, Marx developed concepts of socialism in opposition to the opportunist Lassalle and the reformist Gotha Programme. Marx developed these concepts in class struggle against the Lassalleans in order to protect the interests of the workers' movement as a whole. Thus, my first point is that when we are looking at these concepts dialectically, we are not model-building, but rather trying to define socialism in the context of actual class struggle. Even when we are dealing with

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these problems theoretically, we are talking about concepts that have emerged concretely in class struggle.

Another counter to empiricism is historical materialism. Marxist concepts of socialism have developed historically within the theoretical framework which has come out of the revolutionary movement. The concepts of historical materialism are not based directly on the immediate experience of the revolution in this country or that country; they address the world movement as a whole, and the largest unit of capitalism, which obviously in this time and place is the world-system. We won't argue when the world-system started, but we certainly live in a capitalist world-system.

Thus, if we talk about socialism within the theoretical framework of historical materialism, we are using concepts such as world-system and capitalist mode of production which go beyond immediate experience. We also have to begin talking about what we think might be the communist mode of production and see socialism as something moving toward that. But our concept of mode of production cannot be limited only to the forces of production, not just the economy (economism); it has to encompass the whole mode of production, including relations of production and the superstructure.

Another way of looking at this, to make it slightly more concrete, is to go back to Marx. It's all there, all the seeds for a theory of socialism. True enough, they have to be developed and have to be developed for our conditions.

The seeds are, of course, in the *Communist Manifesto*. Its approach is dialectical and theoretical. The theory and program speak directly to the revolutionary conditions of 1844. The emphasis is on class struggle. Although Marx and Engels placed appropriate emphasis on the material preconditions for communism (the contradiction between private appropriation and advanced forces of production), they defined communism politically (not economically) as the outcome of continuous class struggle.

The *Manifesto* also exemplifies a consistent proletarian stand. Marx and Engels distinguished their proletarian concepts of communism from bourgeois and petty bourgeois approaches. In fact, in this early text, they tossed out the very concept of socialism as unnecessary ideological baggage. The standpoint of the essay is communism and the proletariat.

Two passages of the *Manifesto* are worth quoting in full, because they define the poles of bourgeois and petty bourgeois thought, which even today form the ideological substance of state welfare socialism. These poles parallel what we have called the deviationist tendencies of empiricism and idealism. Both evade class analysis and the issue of class struggle under the hegemony of the proletariat.

What Marx and Engels identified as "Conservative or Bourgeois Socialism" represented what we would recognize now as empiricist, technocratic, or bureaucratic concepts of socialism. The forms have changed, but not their class content.

This Socialism sought to depreciate every revolutionary movement in the eyes of the working class, by showing that no mere political reform, but only a change in the material conditions of existence, in economical relations, could be of any advantage to them. By changes in the material conditions of existence, this form of Socialism, however, by no means understands abolition of the bourgeois relations of production, an abolition that can be effected only by a revolution, but administrative reforms, based on the continued existence of these relations; reforms, therefore, that in no respect affect the relations between capital and labour, but, at the best, lessen the cost, and simplify the administrative work, of bourgeois government.<sup>1</sup>

What they identified as "Critical-Utopian Socialism," represented the idealist or humanist deviation from Marxism:

The undeveloped state of the class struggle, as well as their own surroundings, causes Socialists of this kind to consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favoured. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society?<sup>2</sup>

The economists evade class and class struggle by treating change as a technical problem of administration and planning; idealists evade by appealing to the good will of the mythical "man in general." But the theoretical and political units for Marxism are classes, not individuals or economic forces considered outside the context of class struggle.

Although the *Manifesto* has often been taken as the Bible of Marxism, Marx and Engels readily admitted that the text needed rectification. What was missing was precisely a theory of the transition from capitalism to socialism and a theory of socialism as the transition to communism. For example, they noted in particular their failure to take into account the relation between the state and the proletariat in these periods of transition, a problem raised acutely by the experience of the Paris Commune:

One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made State machinery, and wield it for its own purposes."<sup>3</sup>

Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* began the rectification which culminated in a revolutionary conception of socialism as a period of transition to com-

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munism. The text is an exceptional example of the dialectical method defending a proletarian standpoint, and historical materialism against both economistic and idealistic concepts of petty bourgeois socialism. In a line-by-line critique of the Lassallean proposal to use the capitalist state in a peaceful transition to a kind of state welfare socialism, Marx argued that no bourgeois structures were neutral. The collectivization of the means of production and the establishment of the state as a dictatorship of the proletariat initiated socialism as a period of continued class struggle against the capitalist relations that remain in the state, the division of labor and ideology.

Later, faced with the actual prospect of seizing state power, Lenin in his Notebook *Marxism and the State* and in *State and Revolution* expanded Marx's class analysis of the state and superstructure against petty bourgeois pretensions of classless neutrality.

After Lenin's death we know that nationalist, economistic and statist conceptions of socialist construction tended increasingly to dominate in the USSR and throughout the Third International. The analysis of socialism as a period of transition and continued class struggle, begun by Marx and developed by Lenin, remained officially closed and mired in economism. The dominant tendency within the workers' movement was to define socialism as an end in itself, a system of state planning, which could be achieved in one country. The historical break between China and the USSR, and particularly Mao's theories of transition, reopened the debate by opposing economism and stressing the importance of continued political and ideological struggle against class relations within the labor process and the larger social division of labor.<sup>4</sup>

These texts of Marx, Lenin and Mao are basic readings for a theory of socialism. They have two things in common. First, they do not address concepts of socialism in an abstract or empiricist manner. The concepts are developed dialectically in the context of actual class struggle. Indeed, that is why we are talking about these concepts today. Our purpose is not to build models, but to develop concepts for our own experience, our own class struggle. Secondly, the concepts of Marx, Lenin and Mao defend theory. They were developed within the theoretical framework of historical materialism and were, therefore, not limited to immediate experience and perception.

Now I would like to give some specific examples of empiricist and idealist concepts which deviate from and form obstacles to proletarian socialism. By stressing unity rather than contradiction, determination by ideas or economic forces rather than by class struggle, these concepts serve the interests of those groups who stand to gain most by state welfare socialism and state welfare capitalism.

State welfare socialism clearly serves the interests of the new petty bourgeoisie of technocrats and managers, for it leaves their class position over the working class unexamined and uncontested. This mystification of class analysis can be accomplished by defining socialism in

empiricist and economistic terms as a technical problem of economic planning, as more equitable distribution, as a change in the mode of distribution. We shall see that the theoretical result of this position is no class analysis; the political result, the curtailment of the workers' struggle to command, control and organize their own labor.

The concept of state welfare socialism found its classical expression in 1875 in the program of the Lassallean German Workers' Party:

The emancipation of labour demands the promotion of the instruments of labour to the common property of society, and the co-operative regulation of the total social labour with equitable distribution of the proceeds of labour.<sup>5</sup>

This emphasis on distribution has crept into every social democratic program since 1875. For example, 100 years later, in the U.S., the New American Movement declared that:

Our aim is to establish working class control of the enormous productive capacity of American industry, to create a society that will provide material comfort and security for all people, and in which the full development of every individual will be the basic goal.<sup>6</sup>

In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx had already explained why it was theoretically incorrect to "make such a fuss" about "distribution" and to put principal stress on it:

The distribution of the means of consumption at any time is only a consequence of the distribution of the conditions of production themselves. The latter distribution, however, is a feature of the mode of production itself . . . Vulgar socialism (and from it in turn a section of democracy) has taken over from the bourgeois economists the consideration and treatment of distribution as independent of the mode of production and hence the presentation of socialism as turning principally on distribution. After the real position has long been made clear, why go back again?<sup>7</sup>

Why indeed do certain self-proclaimed Marxists "go back again" and continue their emphasis on distribution? The answer is simple: the incorrect theory, like the correct theory, grows out of a distinctive class position and distinctive class practices, and it cannot be corrected by mere education. Both the Lassallean German Workers' Party and its modern social democratic counterparts like the New American Movement advocate reformist roads to socialism. Lassalle, the architect of the Gotha Programme, and a class collaborationist, had assumed that socialism could be achieved with the aid of the

Prussian state. Modern petty bourgeois reformists stand to gain by advocating "more equitable distribution," which would leave untouched their class position over the working class.

In her critique of such reformists, Marlene Dixon has made the historical connection between class and theory, and has drawn out the implications for the difference between proletarian and petty bourgeois socialism.

The essence of petty bourgeois socialism is to retain the economic substructure of capitalist relations of production, while changing only the *mode of distribution*. In the petty bourgeois socialist vision, capitalist relations of production and the consequent division of labor and antagonistic classes remain unchanged – the working class remains the working class, socially and economically subordinated.

The implications for our understanding of proletarian socialism are clear:

Distribution alone cannot define socialism, for proletarian socialism *must* demand not only new, humane modes of distribution . . . but also *must create fundamentally new relations of production, new and human labor processes* – in short, the abolition of private property *and* of the industrial system as it has been organized under capitalism.<sup>8</sup>

To summarize, one of the dimensions of the economist error is to emphasize mode of distribution, to say, as in Lassalle's statement, that socialism will depend on more equal distribution of the goods of society. Now what's wrong with that? What's wrong is that the mode of distribution in society is part of the mode of production. It is part of the relations of production in society and therefore, if we are going to start with the mode of distribution in order to define socialism, we are really starting with the result of a process of inequality which we have not explained. Marx points this out very clearly in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. And we know from our own experience that if we have distributive socialism, state welfare socialism, conditions may get better for the working class, depending on the world situation, but the actual situation of the working class is not changed.

Another empiricist error is to equate socialism with the functioning of the state. Like economism, statism signals the importation of a fundamentally bourgeois concept into Marxism. Statism emphasizes the legal road to socialism and equates developed socialism with the democratic functioning of the "state of the whole people." This concept was integral to the reformist Gotha Programme:

The German Workers' Party, in order to pave the way to the solution of the social question, demands the establishment of producers' co-operative societies with state aid under the democratic control of the toiling people.<sup>9</sup>

Statism has also been built into the platforms of the Eurocommunist parties which have declared the end of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It has also developed in countries that began socialist construction with the dictatorship of the proletariat, the explicit recognition of a class state. In the USSR "the state of the whole people" was declared in the Second Soviet Constitution of 1936. Later it was reaffirmed by the Twenty-Second Congress, which simultaneously denounced Stalin and declared that the dictatorship of the proletariat had been superseded. Now every Russian citizen is a member of the socialist world, the socialist mode of production, and "the state of the whole people."

This is very obviously a denial of the dialectic of class struggle. Why? Because from a Marxist viewpoint the state exists only insofar as there are classes and class struggle. The state arose historically to order class relations in the overall interests of the ruling class: the capitalist state in the interests of the bourgeoisie; the socialist state in the interests of the working class.

Thus the declaration of a socialist state of the whole people is in clear contradiction to Marxist theory. If everyone is absorbed into the state, where is the dialectic of change? Where is there something outside of the state? What then is the relationship of the party to the state? Where is the independence and dialectical force of workers who will push the state along the road to socialism, if we equate socialism with the state and declare that everyone is equal in the state? The declaration is nothing more than the rhetoric of the bourgeois state, the rhetoric of equality masking class inequality. In other words, we equate socialism with the state of the whole people only at the risk of denying class and class struggle in the socialist transition to communism.

Statism and economism are both empiricist deviations. In bourgeois fashion, they emphasize distribution over the mode of production, the unity of the whole people over class divisions and the class struggle. But there are also idealistic definitions of socialism which have come out in reaction to empiricism. All of these concepts, empiricist and idealist, are revisionist because they either distort or deny the class struggle in the transition to socialism or in the transition from socialism to communism. I want to say a few words about these idealistic deviations because they have been particularly popular among "New Leftists" in the United States and in other countries that have not been engaged in the kind of revolutionary struggles that have occurred elsewhere.

One idealist error we have already identified is ultra-leftism, or socialism defined according to principle rather than practice in concrete conditions. Related to this error is voluntarism, overstressing the relations of production and class struggle and underplaying the need to develop forces of production, the material basis for our liberation from the drudgery of labor.

If voluntaristic concepts distort class struggle, humanist concepts define it out of existence. As we have already seen, the *Communist Manifesto* identifies humanism with utopian socialism. In more recent times,

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we can identify humanism in the famous pronouncements of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR: the so-called rectification of Stalinism, which was no rectification at all because it did not address the class struggle, and simply pointed to the man, Stalin, the personality cult. This is the humanist way of explaining uneven socialist construction. Why humanist? Because the unit of analysis is not the mode of production, not class, but an extraordinarily horrible or extraordinarily great individual who moves society one step backward or one step forward along the road of socialism. There is nothing of class struggle in this.

Humanist definitions of socialism have been rampant since the Twentieth Congress, both in the Soviet Union and the anti-Soviet Western "democracies," without for a moment threatening the class roots of economism. To be sure, socialism is about humanism, the struggle for human dignity and equality. Nevertheless, we must distinguish socialist from bourgeois humanism, and

recognize that the rhetoric of man in general is a bourgeois rhetoric covering genuine class inequalities. If we do not address that inequality, if we do not address the necessity of struggle, the necessity for a dictatorship of the proletariat to guide that struggle, then we are not going to get anywhere.

In sum, the revisionist definitions of socialism, whether they take the form of humanism or economism, have come out of class struggle, but they have tended to represent class interests that deny the very class struggle that has produced them. They have denied it by stressing the individual, the idea, the economic force, rather than class and class struggle. As Marxists, what we have to do is rethinking and reevaluating the various concepts of socialism is consciously to bring them back into the class struggle, and bring them back into a theoretical understanding of the capitalist mode of production on a world scale.

## NOTES

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C. Tucker, ed. (New York, W. V. Norton, 1978), pp. 496-97.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 498.
3. "Preface to the German Edition of 1872," *op. cit.*, p. 470.
4. Mao Zedong, *A Critique of Soviet Economics* (New York and London, Monthly Review, 1977).
5. "Programme of the German Workers' Party," in Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York, International, 1973), p. 89.
6. The New American Movement, *The Political Perspective* (1972; 1974), p. 2.
7. *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, pp. 10-11.
8. Marlene Dixon, "Proletarian versus Petty Bourgeois Socialism," *Synthesis*, Vol. I, No. 1 (Summer 1976), pp. 16-18.
9. "Programme of the German Workers' Party," *op. cit.*, p. 16.