

# Marxism Yesterday and Today

by Colin Leys

published in *The Baha'i Faith and Marxism*, pages 43-49  
Ottawa, ON: Baha'i Studies Publications, 1987

There are two main themes in Marx's conception of socialism: (1) democracy, i.e., political freedom, personal freedom, self-activity--people deciding their own fate, not being dominated by others; and (2) the emancipation of labour, i.e., relief from grinding drudgery in the struggle for existence; working to live, not living to work. Humankind now has the capacity to produce enough for all, the task is to ensure that this happens and that all enjoy it.

Marx's original (1847) vision of how this would happen was roughly as follows. The bourgeoisie was a revolutionary class that forced Western Europe out of its feudal framework, reorganized the entire society along market lines, and set in motion a self-sustaining and colossal expansion of productivity and of new products but at the cost of acute contradictions, expressed in the form of miserable poverty in the midst of plenty, acute inequalities, periodic slumps, social tensions, and wars. However, this process will also assure its own supersession since it simultaneously creates a proletariat whose exploitation and oppression forms it into an organized and revolutionary class in its turn. "What the bourgeoisie produce above all, therefore, are its own gravediggers."<sup>1</sup> In the meantime, capitalism has raised output to the point where there need no longer be any shortages of essential goods. The working class seizes power and embarks on the creation of a socialist society.

One of the distinctive features of Marxism, compared with other theories of social change, is its focus on the precise historical structures and tendencies at work in any given place at any given time. It seeks to grasp these structures and tendencies, to understand the social forces at work, and to formulate practicable strategies for change based on this analysis. While Marx would have agreed with Bahá'u'lláh's image of a tempest sweeping through the modern world, he went further and identified it as the tempestuous productive and political forces released by capitalism, spreading on a global scale. The image he originally had of how capitalism would, in turn, be replaced by socialism (as outlined above) was based on a first attempt to grasp the dynamics of this process, as revealed in Western Europe.

But by the 1870s two things had already happened to alter this picture. First, the working class in Western Europe was increasingly becoming organized in parliamentary political parties and gradually became reformist, not transformist; and second, capitalism had become a worldwide phenomenon affecting many countries in which the working class was still a small minority. In Russia, in particular, still essentially feudal in spite of the recent ending of serfdom, a revolution was imminent. The question was, would feudalism give way to capitalism and all its miseries and contradictions? Was the task of the Russian socialists simply to help usher in capitalism, as a necessary precondition for socialism?

---

1. Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* [1848] in R.C. Tucker, ed., *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2d ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 483.

The Russian socialists wrote to ask Marx for his opinion. He replied that his vision of the process, as sketched in his earlier writings, was not a universal schema, and Russia might have a chance of going directly to socialism if the peasant communal system in the countryside could be prevented from decaying any further. So (to oversimplify drastically what was the result of a very complex and intense struggle within Russian social democracy) the Russian socialists under Lenin determined to make their attempt to drive straight for socialism doing capitalism's job of expanding the productive forces along the way.

The problems were too numerous--the exhaustion of the whole population by the war with Germany; the devastation of the economy, followed by the civil war (at one point the Red Army was fighting on sixteen different fronts against the first contras, backed by the western allies); the death of so many of the best Bolsheviks in the war; the growing use of violence and even terror in the desperation of the war; the formation of the political police; and finally the rise of Stalin through the centralized and authoritarian structure of the party, ending in dictatorship. There was also the failure of the working class in Western Europe to make a parallel, supporting revolution, as Lenin and especially Trotsky had always seen to be necessary if a revolution in Russia was to have a chance of achieving its aims.

The ultimate results we know. Few, if any, sane Soviet citizens would like to go back to the Russia of the Czars, and contrary to what is often imagined, probably very few would like to change to a system like the United States today, however much they may appreciate aspects of North American popular culture or envy the consumer society as it is presented on American television. Soviet progress in the space of less than seventy years, in spite of yet another world war, has been spectacular. They have gained a great deal. At the same time, it may well be that the Soviet system is approaching some sort of crisis arising from its own contradictions--the contradiction between centralized political control and the need for a decentralized, more market-based economy now that the Soviet economy has become as complex as it has. But this is not guaranteed, and in the meantime it is very clear that the Soviet Union as it is today is very far indeed from what Marx wanted. It in no way represents either democracy or the emancipation of the people from toil. It is as everyone says--a not very efficient, hierarchical, secretive, bureaucratic grey and oppressive system (even though the USSR has also supported progressive causes and is not the expansionist "evil empire" that the American Right find it convenient to pretend).

What matters, however, in this as in other spheres, is to understand the reasons. It was a Salvadorean who said, "...ideal revolutions exist only in the minds of those who have never had to make one." That is, the ideal conditions are *never* present.

There are several reasons for what happened in Russia, reasons that are not unique to Russia and that are extremely important to recognize. The most important is perhaps that the enemies of socialism are often ready to commit huge resources to defeating r evolutions whether by direct intervention, as in Russia, or by destabilization and the use of mercenaries, as in present-day Nicaragua, Angola, and Mozambique. Also, those attempting the revolution are only human beings with their usual frailties, who have often had too little education, too little time to think everything through. They are the leaders of the

oppressed and deprived majority, not of the well-educated few, but this can never be reason for not making the attempt. The same reasons that handicap the leaders are also reasons that oblige them to try--the impossibility of securing freedom, democracy, education, and economic liberation for the majority in any other way. It was Engels who said, after urging the necessity of doing everything possible to seek power democratically, that the right of revolution was in the end the only really historical right. That is, if we have the right to make our own fate, we have the right to make a revolution when reform is denied to us.

Secondly, Marxist socialists today, like the Russian Marxists at the turn of the century, have to face complex situations, usually in developing countries, often with relatively small working classes. This means that the workers must form alliances with many other social groups, especially peasants, the lower-middle class, and students. In Russia, the Bolsheviks understood this but did not make organic, long-term links with these other elements, and eventually paid the price of having to suppress them by force. To avoid this, a genuine unity, based on a genuinely pluralist approach, is essential.

Thirdly, after the experience of Stalinism, it is clear that the kind of organization you form to fight for socialism must try to prefigure the kind of socialist society you wish to build. The Leninist party--a vanguard organization under the centralized control of a cadre of dedicated, trained professional

revolutionaries--was designed as a fighting organization capable of surviving and eventually winning power in the special conditions of Czarist Russia. It succeeded, but at a terrible price--Stalinism. Today, it is doubtful if such a party can succeed again, and in any case the price is too high to pay. Its tendency to lead to a new form of repressive society is too obvious. Something more open, more democratic, is essential, even in the conditions of guerrilla war. It must be a democratic, caring, open organization if a democratic, caring, open socialist society is the goal.

This is once again a great oversimplification, but let it serve for the moment: these are some of the lessons of the first revolutionary socialist experience, and these lessons have been learned. To see this, let us turn from Russia in 1917 to Nicaragua today.

## **Nicaragua**

Nicaragua today is in many ways a leading example of the way these principles have been adopted by contemporary Marxists--although note that only a minority of the Sandinista leaders and their party members are Marxists; also, there is no need to idealize the Sandinista leaders, to claim that no mistakes have been made, or anything like that. However, their achievement is already such that for many Marxists today, the line followed in Nicaragua by the Nicaraguan Marxists, in collaboration with their non-Marxist allies, is a powerful example of the best kind of modern Marxist thinking. For example:

### ***Pluralism and Elections***

The Sandinistas have maintained the right of all parties to exist and have held elections in 1984 that were judged exemplary for fairness by all unbiased observers, in spite of the attempt by the United States of America and its Nicaraguan allies to make it seem otherwise.

### ***Collaboration with Christians***

Without the socialist current in the Roman Catholic church, the Frente Sandinista de Liberacion Nacional would not have acquired the mass base it now has. The socialists have welcomed the exponents of liberation theology. The foreign minister is a Catholic priest, Father Miguel D'Escoto, as is the minister of education, Father Fernando Cardenal.

### ***Democracy***

There is constant emphasis on democracy at all levels, from local community block councils, to the highest levels of the party and legislature. In this connection the right-wing media have tried to obscure the facts by gross efforts of misrepresentation, especially in connection with the 1984 elections and the current project to give autonomy to the Atlantic Coast region.

### ***Equality of the Sexes***

There is a continuing attempt to secure more equality for women. Nicaragua, like most Latin American societies, has inherited a strongly sexist culture. The Sandinistas have worked to change this by giving women education, promoting them in the party and in government, and changing the laws to facilitate women's advancement.

Progress on all these and other fronts has been imperfect, not least because so much of the country's slender resources have had to be committed to fighting the counterrevolutionaries (organized and

financed by the United States government), who have behaved with a savagery that is seldom adequately reported (i.e., terror of the ugliest kind--cutting off women's breasts, cutting men's throats and pulling their tongues through the hole). It is the same in Angola and Mozambique. Economic life also has indeed become hard in Nicaragua--this is what the United States has spent millions of dollars to try to achieve. The question is whether the right of revolution--the only really historical right-- must be abandoned, simply because the United States of America has the power and is willing to try to deny it. The answer given by Marxists is no.

## In the First World

What distinguishes Marxist practice from that of other socialists in advanced capitalist countries? First, there are always problems of theory and practice to be resolved. Among thoughtful Marxists it is a truism that Marxism has been "in crisis" for nearly a century. It has had to deal both with the changes that occur in capitalism and with real weaknesses in Marx's own thought. These issues were first raised in the famous Bernstein debate in the 1890s, and they are still being intensely debated today. < P> The German social democratic publicist Eduard Bernstein argued that Marx had been wrong to imagine that socialism must come through a crisis in capitalism and a sudden, radical break with constitutional forms, a seizure of power, or dictatorship of the proletariat. He thought that capitalism had proved its staying power; however, it had also shown itself capable of being reformed into socialism. He proposed to abandon the idea of revolution in favour of evolution--gradual change towards socialism by parliamentary means. This was later the basis of the split between the majority of the members of the old Marxist

parties, who became social democrats; and the more radical minority, who formed the new Communist parties all over the world after 1919.

Today, the major western Communist parties have--with the exception of the Communist parties of Italy and Spain, in particular--often been discredited by their Stalinism, although Communists play an important role in several other countries, especially in some trade unions. There remain two other main kinds of Marxist: those who take a broadly Trotskyist interpretation of Marxism and adhere to one or another of the numerous groups that are descended from Trotsky's Fourth International; and independent Marxists. By this latter category, I mean people who identify themselves with the cause of exploited and oppressed people wherever they are and who try to work within a party or some other organization (e.g., a trade union, a single-issue group like a peace movement organization or a women ' s organization) from a consistent Marxian perspective.

This means different things to different people, but it usually includes the following:*Aiming for Long-Run Transformation* Policies should be judged according to their long-run effect on strengthening the ability of the working majority to take control over their own lives. This means, for example, that a reform is more valuable if it involves more democratic participation, if it strengthens people's awareness of the nature of capitalist alienation, class divisions, exploitation, oppression and make s them more likely to press for further fundamental changes.*Seeing the Totality of the Struggle* Marxists do not see the problem of unemployment in Quebec and repression in the Philippines as unconnected, or the issue of Star Wars and the United States war against Nicaragua as unconnected. They see the international links between all popular struggles and understand how struggle on one front is important for struggle on all the others. Thus, for instance, it is obvious in retrospect that the struggle in Vietnam was crucial for permitting the struggle in Cuba to succeed, and today the struggles in Nicaragua and in South Africa are similarly linked. The link is the worldwide strengths and weaknesses of imperialism.*Women's Liberation*

Marxists have understood--belatedly perhaps--that there can be no socialism, no democracy, economic freedom, or justice without the emancipation of half of the human race from domination by the other half. Therefore, Marxists press for affirmative action for women in all situations and for policies that will advance women, both for their own sake and in order to add their energy to the struggle for socialism.

This means that Marxists take a stand, in principle, on issues like pensions for women, maternity leave, day care, and abortion rights.

## The Marxian Concept of Revolution

I want to add something on the Marxian concept of revolution. The hallmark of Marxism is its insistence on the unity of theory and practice. At the age of twenty-seven, Marx wrote a famous note to himself: "Hitherto the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change*

it."<sup>2</sup> The key concept in his theory of change became the concept of revolution. This is very widely misrepresented, and so it seems useful at this stage in our discussion to say something about the concept. By revolution, Marx meant transformation. The moment of taking power was only a particular step in the process, the important thing is the radical reorganization of society, the transformation of the social relations, for example, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production, the land, the oil wells, the plants as well as the class relations, the income inequality, the educational discrimination, the power relations, the alienated political life that are based on private ownership of the means of production. This takes a long time and also involves a reconstruction of the system of ideas that is dominant in society. For example, instead of the host of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's nightly news magazine, *The Journal*, treating someone like Yasser Arafat with aggression, while treating right-wing political leaders with deference, one would try to achieve television treatment of the world from the standpoint of those who suffer, are deprived, and are struggling for their freedom. All this takes time and is a long drawn out struggle, full of difficulties, mistakes, and defeats as well as successes.

This is Marx's conception. Nonetheless, the issue of taking power is critical; Marxists believe that the majority are *entitled* to use their political majority to bring about the reorganization of society. This poses the question of how they can obtain the power to do this. Marx did not think that the achievement of power had to be violent. In 1872 at The Hague, he made a famous speech in which he said that in countries with democratic systems such as the Netherlands

Britain, and the United States of America, it should be possible to make the transition to socialism peacefully, through elections. However, he also pointed out in other writings that this depended on the ruling class accepting the verdict of democracy. It does not rest with the socialist revolutionaries alone, and the historical evidence was already discouraging. The year before Marx's speech at The Hague, 30,000 workers had been massacred in Paris by the French government. This followed the famous Paris Commune of 1871, when the workers and lower-middle class leaders remaining in Paris took over the city (after the government had abandoned it to the advancing German army) and ran it as a sort of socialist mini-state for four months. A similar number have been put to death by the right wing in El Salvador since 1979. In the last sixteen months to the end of 1985, at least 1,000 people were killed by the police and the army in South Africa for merely *demonstrating* for reforms. The record is not encouraging, and those who want to end the power of the propertied classes have to face the possibility that force may be ultimately unavoidable. In this respect, it is important not to be mesmerized by the ideology of the right wing, which invariably highlights any violence against itself and ignores its own violence against the majority. Not only does it ignore overt violence-- in fact, it sometimes even glorifies it, as in the case of Reagan's description of the Nicaraguan contras, led by the professional torturers and murderers of Somoza's National Guard, as "freedom fighters"--it also ignores the day by

---

2. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach [1844]* in Tucker, 145.

day violence of repressive regimes, the violence of starvation and stunted lives. Recall what Mark Twain said about the way people reacted to the Terror during the French Revolution:

There were two "reigns of terror" if we would but remember it and consider it; the one wrought murder in hot passion, the other in heartless cold blood; the one lasted mere months, the other lasted a thousand years; the one inflicted death upon a thousand persons, the other upon a hundred millions; but our shudders are all for the "horrors" of the minor terror, the momentary terror, so to speak; whereas, what is the horror of swift death by the axe compared with lifelong death from hunger, cold insult, cruelty, and heartbreak? What is swift death by lightning compared with slow death by fire at the stake? A city cemetery could contain the coffins filled by the brief terror we have all been so diligently taught to shiver and mourn over; but all France could hardly contain the coffins filled by the older and real Terror--that unspeakably bitter and awful Terror which none of us has been taught to see in its vastness or pity as it deserves.<sup>3</sup>

In reality today, not only the silent violence but also the open violence is initiated by the Right, not by the Left. The militarization of politics in so much of the world is the institutionalization of violence against the Left. It was not Marxists or any other kind of socialists who initiated violence in Argentina or Guatemala but rather the officers of the army and the police; Marxists have been chief among their many victims.

If force is contemplated by Marxists, it is because people are too often left with no alternative. In too much of the world today, the options have been cruelly narrowed by the possessing classes, supported directly or indirectly by the United States of America. In this respect, Marxists are no different from others who seek legitimate change and are faced with bleak force. The African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa is a good example. Ever since its formation in 1912, it has followed a policy of peaceful protest, under the influence of Gandhi. It was the ruthless violence of the South African government that finally forced the ANC reluctantly to take up armed struggle. Christians in Latin America have found themselves forced to the same painful conclusion. It was a Brazilian bishop who answered a question about his willingness to collaborate with Communists in the following way: "...the choice we have to make in my country is whether one is for life and against death. I am for life and against death, and I therefore fight alongside all those who are also on the side of life."

---

3. Cited in William Hinton, *Fanshen* (New York: Vintage, 1968), 101.