

Strategies and Processes of Social Change

by **Howard Buchbinder**

published in *The Baha'i Faith and Marxism*, pages 21-26
Ottawa, ON: Baha'i Studies Publications, 1987

Putting one's head into the lion's mouth to operate on a sore tooth has its manifest disadvantages.

--Robert S. Lynd

Men [sic] make their own history.... but not under circumstances chosen by themselves.

--Karl Marx

The topic for this session deals with strategies and processes of social change. In order to do justice to this topic, there are a number of subissues that need to be explored:

- How Marxist ways of thinking about the world inform political practice and vice-versa;
- How bourgeois ways of thinking about the world alter the nature of this political practice;
- The issue of ideology and non-ideology;
- Ideology, strategy, and practice.

Let us begin by considering briefly how Marxists think about the world. Marx developed a new social theory, which can be referred to as Historical Materialism. It was materialist in that it explained the social world in terms of an interaction between people and nature, grounded in the process of producing those goods necessary to meet material needs. The way in which we organize ourselves to produce what we need to survive determines the sorts of relationships that will occur. It was historical in that capitalist society (or feudal society or slave society for that matter) was understood and analyzed as only one stage in a much longer process of historical development.

The materialist view informs analysis in that one looks to the way in which a given society organizes itself to produce what it needs in order to understand the nature of relationships and institutions that are present in any particular society. For example, the family is studied in terms of its relation to the prevailing "mode of production." We can only understand the organization and structure of family life in the medieval world if we consider it within the context of the feudal mode of production. Changes in the family as we know it today can only be understood if we consider what role and function the family performs within the capitalist mode of production. The historical aspect of historical materialism means that to understand the family, we consider it over time or we identify on which period of time we are focussing. The tendency within the liberal/bourgeois mode of analysis is to be ahistorical and nonmaterialist.

For example, we tend to think of the work ethic as universal. It is not recognized that the work ethic was spawned by the capitalist mode of production and was not present in the feudal era. There was no need for it in the way production was organized in that era. There was no dependence on a free, mobile labour force that would desire to sell its labour power in a market. What we experience are constant references to the universality of this ethic. This has great influence on the sort of analysis that follows and on the sorts of change which might be contemplated. This relationship between the economy--the way production is organized--and the political and social institutions and processes of society is at the heart of a Marxist analysis. It is also at the heart of a Marxist strategy for change.

The prevailing view within bourgeois thought is quite different. It considers Marxist thought as "ideological politics." In so doing, there is an implicit notion that there is no systematized paradigm or screen through

which social phenomena are understood within liberal thinking. Rather, there are a number of disconnected values and concepts which inform analysis: democracy, competition, mobility, pluralism. There has been a fairly strong current within capitalist-inspired social science, which sees an end to ideology as having occurred. The "excesses" and "failures" of socialism and the successes of capitalism in not fulfilling the Marxian revolutionary "prophecy" have clearly demonstrated the bankruptcy of "ideology." This "End of Ideology" thesis involves two basic premises. The first refers to the absence of ideological politics in modern North American industrial society; the second refers to the negative effects of ideology: a hindrance to progress towards the "good society." In addition to the bankruptcy of Stalinism (this view spawned by the Cold War more than by good political analysis), industrialization--a massive productive apparatus that was seen to satisfy all needs and wants--made preoccupations with ideology, socialism, or anticapitalism irrelevant. Conflicts between capital and labour--business and unions--were not seen as struggles of opposing classes but as quantitative economic disputes over how to divide the pie.

From the Marxist's point of view, the fragmentation of what is basically class conflict into separate, and supposedly unrelated disputes and problems, focusses attention on events as though they were totally unrelated rather than manifestations of class struggle. The fragmentation of learning into specialties in which knowledge is mystified further extends this process. Thus, the ability to perceive problems as linked to the broader system is an essential element in the development of a change-oriented perspective. Marxism would lead us to opposite conclusions from that of a liberal capitalist perspective. In fact, the terminology varies according to perspective. "End of Ideology" theorists speak of industrialism, while Marxists speak of capitalism. The former look at aspects of capitalism; the use of terminology mystifies.

Strategies for Change

In very brief fashion, the above touches on the framework of Marxist analysis with some reflections on bourgeois thinking in order to illustrate the differing stances. Let us now address the issue of change. Marxism relates to change in a dialectical framework. The notion is that everything changes itself as a result of contradictions/tensions. These contradictions are not "caused" by external

factors but are present within any given social process. For instance, capitalism produces both wealth and poverty. There are contradictions and tensions as a result of their generation by the same social order. These contradictions produce change. Both poverty (inequality) and wealth are functional to the system. Yet the non-Marxist prevailing liberal ideology sees it differently--poverty is the result of a breakdown in the system that needs to be corrected--a breakdown in the mechanisms of distribution or redistribution. This has nothing to do with wealth but is rather focussed on tax policy; employment and unemployment; and transfer payment policy. So, change is always occurring as the contradictions that are generated clash with one another. This is not to suggest that one should sit idly by and wait for the "inevitable" to occur, for if one waits long enough, these contradictions will automatically lead to the revolution. In fact, in a sense the revolution is always in process. Mounting the barricades is only a political moment. The system of apartheid in South Africa has within it the seeds of its own destruction. An act of management sets up a dialectical tension between itself and the managed situation that it has created (e.g., note the position of Israel on the West Bank).

The Relationship of Theory and Change

Let us now consider the relationship of theory and practice. As I have already indicated, it is not possible within the perspective of historical materialism to consider a remnant without also considering the whole cloth from which it derives. The development of the social sciences in capitalist society has produced specialists who concentrate on the very minute particles within the total framework. C. Wright Mills referred to this practice as "abstracted empiricism." In a book about the End of Ideology debate, which

took place in the United States, Chaim Waxman suggests that "ultimately we have lost the capacity to envision another social order." Perhaps the best way to define strategy is to recall the encounter between Alice and the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's novel. Alice asks the cat which road to take, and the Cheshire Cat responds by asking where she wants to go. Strategic thinking involves just such considerations. There are two forms of strategies that can be considered here: Strategies may be adaptive, or they may be transforming.

The sorts of change that occur within an adaptive strategy will be limited by the constraints placed by the system itself. The thrust of change within such a strategy is to arrive at an adaptive result, a result that will maintain the integrity of existing arrangements. This does not mean that adaptive change will not be militant or even bloody. It does mean that the ultimate result will insure the maintenance of existing arrangements. A transforming strategy is one whose realization involves a transformation in existing arrangements. The way in which social problems are analyzed will affect the sort of strategy that emerges. A Marxist analysis (historical materialist) must, by definition, consider the problem within the material productive relationships in an historical way. How does this work? Let us consider the issue of poverty.

Most of the North American research on poverty examines the nature of the poor. It defines the poor by drawing an imaginary and arbitrary income line. Those under the line are considered to be poor; those over the line are not. It then proceeds to examine empirically the makeup of this population. Criteria

such as age, sex, location, and education are defined and then examined. Policies, geared towards moving those under the line to positions over the line, are devised. There may be resistance to the implementation of such policies-- perhaps because of expense. Pressure may be organized to force a policy response. There may be demonstrations, lobbying, or media campaigns. In this example note that there is no definition of poverty beyond one's location relative to the line. The issue of causality is dealt with by researching the makeup of the poor population and then designing programmes to move them out of poverty. The Marxist would suggest that this sort of change is based on an analysis that does not examine poverty within the existing mode of production. In fact, it deflects the possibility of any focus on these arrangements by focussing on the victims. The resulting strategy is adaptive. Poverty is dealt with as though it had no relationship to capitalism. The assumption is that if you can move all the people under the line to over the line, poverty will be destroyed. There is no hint that the system will continue to generate poverty as part of its "normal" functioning. There is the notion that it can be cured, like cancer, with some "magic bullet." The closest bourgeois economists come to recognizing this is to suggest that there are "surges of inequality," which, when they are protracted enough, will spur government to make some response.

The relations of capitalist production are rooted in the creation of surplus value by workers and the appropriation of that value by those who own the means of production. This is an exploitive arrangement. The thrust of this system is to privatize wealth in the hands of the owning class and to socialize many of the costs of this production. The burden of these costs is borne by the public. The cyclical nature of capitalist economies creates periods of boom and bust, with the periods of contraction leading to policies that squeeze workers in order to continue support for accumulation by the private sector. There is no full employment so there are always unemployed people--poor people. Actually, most of those people defined as poor are employed. In fact, most of those families work at more than one job. They work very hard to earn their poverty. This contradicts the prevailing mythology that poor people are either disabled or lazy (a mythology that encourages Social Darwinist thinking and deflects criticism from the social order). Workers are moved in and out of production according to its needs, not theirs. Women, young people, other oppressed minorities, and marginal workers serve to fill the ranks of this "reserve army of labour." This is the context within which the Marxist views the inequitable system of distribution that always generates poverty for many and wealth for a few.

The Marxist, in thinking about social change, sees pressures for more transfer payments and higher levels of welfare as adaptive and realizes that if one is to study poverty, one must study wealth. The longer term transforming strategy will move to build solidarity within this working class in order to confront these basic relations of inequity inherent in the capitalist mode of production. The goal is the transformation of the capitalist mode of production and capitalist society as a whole. This poses a very difficult strategic dilemma for the Marxist in advanced capitalist nations where the role of the state is highly developed and sophisticated in terms of policy formulation and implementation that support the accumulation process while buying legitimacy for the state and the system.

The situation is much more clear cut in the Third World where the exploitive relations are present in an imperialist context; where outside capital pauperizes the working population, and the economy as a whole suffers under mountainous debt incurred as the imperialized state borrows funds from the imperialist power in an attempt to replenish the resources depleted by the system of foreign exploitation. Usually, the apparatus of the pauperized state is unable to ensure legitimacy in the face of these relations and must resort to overt repression in order to maintain control. Adaptive strategies become meaningless in such situations and pressures for change develop as overtly transforming.

In both instances, Marxists attempt to work towards social transformation. Within the advanced capitalist centres, transforming strategies are more complicated to develop and implement. There are divisions within the Marxist ranks along strategic lines. In Third World countries, the struggle for social change is defined by the circumstances in a very different manner.

This presentation is neither a prescription for change nor an outline or a methodology, i.e., a set of steps guaranteed to bring about social transformation. It has been necessary to set out the theoretical and analytic context within which Marxists approach issues of social change. This is necessary since Marxists believe in the notion of *praxis*. This refers to the linkage of social theory and social action/practice. Action, which is not informed by theory and analysis, is random; theory and analysis not accompanied by action are impotent. It is this commitment to social change that is essential to Marxist practice. The discussion material presented here attempts to identify the terrain on which this takes place and something of the process involved.