Letter to a Friend

By MILTON HOWARD

DEAR JOE: You have written me a brief letter on the recent dramatic political events which have slashed through many former illusions. You say that you feel somewhat lost because the "old guideposts are gone." You say that you want these guideposts back, but that you don't seem to see how to do that, and you ask me what my thinking has been. Well, here are some of my thoughts for a starter so we can keep on talking about them together.

We are still reeling from the impact of Khrushchev's speech. It was hard to listen to the cries from the lonely prison cells, to read of the ravages of cruelty and mania. Most painful, perhaps, was the feeling of helplessness as we watched these imprisoned Communists, unwavering in their devotion to the cause of Socialism even as they were being taken off to die amid false disgrace and unjustified dishonor. They wrote letters to their executioners warning them of the need for more vigilance against the evil which had invaded the body of Socialism.

Their last words were highly responsible political acts. They went down with their political vision undefiled and unyielding.

They were right, of course, even though it never occurred to them that it was Stalin, so single-mindedly leading the battle for socialist industry, who was also their executioner. I doubt that it would have made any difference to their socialist staunchness even if they had known it. Their agony would have been greater, even as ours is. But their eyes had seen clearly to those truths of society which are leading to Socialism an human freedom, and these truths could not be destroyed even by those who were dooming them in the name of Socialism. You will notice in their letters to the Party's leadership they did not spit upon human life, nor on themselves, nor on man's political will and vision. They did not whine about the hopelessness of human hope, nor the brutalities of all political power. No one could give them lessons in disillusion, for they had been through that and gone beyond. *"Tell me what you believe,"* Goethe had told one of his sickly-suffering friends, *"for I have enough doubts of my own."*

IT WAS, I think, a just retort, for in the end no man can escape responsibility, and responsibility is affirmation, action, purpose, even though some affirmations are refuted and some actions frustrated at a specific moment of history. Despair is not the essence of the human drama, even if tragedy, suffering and struggle are part of its essence.

You say that you feel lost because the landmarks are gone. This is true and not true. For if many of the old landmarks are gone, the compass is still there for the charting of new and truer ones. We could not, of course, discover without shock that our first view of the first socialist revolution had been shot through with misconceptions based on ignorance, and also perhaps on a noble but naive view of the actualities of the price which was being paid by the first socialist country. I marvel at the people who, reading Khrushchev's revelations about Stalin's later development, can comfort themselves easily with wise saws about having to break eggs to make an omelette. This view is too far removed, I think, from human experience and from scientific Socialism to suit me.

To think this way, it seems to me, is to strengthen those who play history and human morality off against each other, those who say that all of history's necessities are contemptible when seen in the light of man's essence. These are the people who say—and how loudly their voices have been growing of late just as humanity is developing the possibilities for a great act of will leading to a new society—that man's salvation lies outside of history and even in defiance of it. For if "breaking omelettes" can so easily become the excuse for any action at all and any time, is not the argument of the protagonists of a highly moral passivity strengthened?

I think that this is a religious view of history, even if it is a "socialist-religious" view. For it means that we cannot make choices at all, since there is a "necessity" even in our worst choices. Necessity there is indeed. But there are choices, too, as to how these necessities shall be brought to fruition. Man makes his own history, albeit he does not make it merely out of his desires, nor out of the whole cloth, as Marx put it.

It is crucial, I think, to make this distinction between the necessities of history, amid which and through which man exercises his will and makes moral decisions, and the grisly Calvinism which sees history as a fatalism. Surely, we don't think that Marxian necessity and Calvinistic fatalism are twins?

IT TURNS out, though, that Stalin thought so, and that he even ended by considering his crimes to be social necessities. There was enormous necessity in the forced march to socialist industrialization. Stalin's

strength was that he saw it so keenly. Without it, would there have been a People's China or anything of that great turning point in history which we can now perceive as a new stage of prolonged co-existence, a situation containing such great potentialities for human advance? But was there the same necessity in the concentration of power, both in state and party, in the crushing of people, in the quasi-religious mania and its terrible consequences? Stalin's Calvinism merged itself with a real historic necessity which it fulfilled and betrayed at the same time. For while Stalin swore to uphold Lenin's behests, he also in his own way betrayed them, and the betrayal and the fulfillment were presented as a unity. That was where the crimes and the tragedies began, and where the enemies of Socialism were to draw blood in their novels and their books.

BUT you might ask—and the haters of Socialism eagerly assert it—was there not an inevitable relationship between the betrayal and the fulfillment? Was not one imbedded in the other? Were not the crimes inherent in the task itself? I think you will grant now that the danger of unbridled power, of power over the people and not through them, was far greater in the first socialist country than we had imagined. In fact, I think you will grant that the entire problem of how to keep power dispersed, how to prevent tyranny in the use of power, is far more difficult and complex a question than we had dreamed of. The anarchists' criticism of all power as such was far from being sheer foolishness, though it was one-sided. The warnings of such Marxists as Rosa Luxembourg ("an eagle," Lenin said of her in admiration) of just such dangers of centralized power, even in a socialist society, take on a new importance; that whole debate on power and freedom of these clashing Marxists in the '20s has a new relevance.

Of course, in the Soviet Union the problem of guaranteeing a genuine socialist superstructure of humanistic freedom on a socialist base was complicated by the unique fact that they had to start from nothing and first had to build this economic base amid the constant danger of attack. And this means that the general possibility of a centralization of arbitrary power—*which is always present in any centralization of economic power*—was far more imminent in the first socialist country than we had imagined. But this is very different, I think, from the conclusion that the congealing of social freedom into a semi-military social formation was an inevitability even under these difficult and unique circumstances.

Thus Walter Lippmann, assuming the judicious tone of indulgent forgiveness, concludes in a recent column that, given the backwardness

of Russia, it became a necessity for Stalin to whip the Soviet peoples into the industrial advance they needed (or which he arbitrarily decided they needed, as Socialism's enemies assert). But this "defense" is a subtle attack. For it assumes that Stalin's way of grappling with all the necessities of socialist construction was the only possible way. It assumes that the course of socialist development in this first socialist state was what Lenin had previsioned for it, that it was Socialism itself (they will not even grant that socialism will be different in each country) which created Stalin's arbitrary power, and that it will always do the same wherever it exists. Lippmann wants us to believe, under the guise of necessity, that terrorism and Socialism are logically intertwined.

HIS argument is a sophistry even on his own assumptions. If it was a "necessity" to "whip" the Soviet peoples into a "forced march" of industrialization because a backward Russia faced a hostile encirclement, how does it follow that future socialist governments will have to pursue the same course? Notice how easily Lippmann assumes that the immerse and constant efforts of the West to intervene and prevent Socialist construction were a "necessity." Thus, the workers and peasants of the first socialist state have had to endure not only the backbreaking burdens of "forced march" labor; they also had to endure the gibes of those in the Western countries who were forcing them into their desperate labors, and the reproaches of those classes which failed to end the encirclement by creating socialist governments of their own. "See how hard they have to work, and for so little," jeered the militarists who were compelling the Soviet peoples to rush the building of their defense against the assault which finally did come with such brutality. "Why do you not have more freedom in your beleaguered fortress?" asked some who were rarely seen acting to provide freedom for the Soviet people to work out their own destiny.

BUT even from a new study of the first socialist transformation in the world we learn that within the harsh necessities imposed on it by its moral-sounding enemies, the socialist development was seen differently by Lenin than it later came to be seen by Stalin. There was another way, just as soundly based on necessity, but different in its approach to democracy, freedom, and power. We are beginning to realize that we have been reared on a Stalinist version of the first socialist revolution, and not on a genuine history of it in all its complexities and contradictions.

For example, did you know that Lenin believed as early as 1923 that the new working class government had consolidated its power sufficiently to begin to plan to go over to a relaxation of the repressiveness imposed on it by civil war and intervention? Did you know, furthermore, that in the final years of his life, Lenin was alarmed at the rapidly developing centralized power within the party he had done so much to create, and that he sought to halt this dangerous trend by proposing to enlarge the central committee to one or even two hundred members?

We know how far-sighted was Lenin's fear of Stalin's lust for power, and how vainly he adjured the party "to find some way to remove Stalin." But we did not know—and still do not know fully—how many of Lenin's keenest ideas, in letters, memos, and articles, on the rising problems of freedom and power were suppressed during Lenin's final days and soon after. (See the Soviet journal, *Problems of History,* March, 1956.) We do not know—though I am sure we shall—the ful record of how Stalin turned all political critics, dissenters, and even devoted party people on whom his suspicion fell, into traitors. Thus, the real history of the struggle against Trotskyism, the Bukharin group, and the other defendants in the Moscow trials of the 1930's is still unknown to us. What would you say is the meaning of the following words in the above-cited historical journal:

"Anti-Leninist deviations of the Trotskyites, the Right and nationalist deviations were looked upon in a shallow manner as the act of agents of foreign intelligence."

In a shallow manner! A remarkable understatement, is it not?

WE ARE finding out that Lenin never expected or desired that the party would merge with the government; he did not subscribe to, and would not have supported Stalin's theory that the class struggle within the country would increase with the advance of socialist construction. Surely, Lenin had no illusions about the dangers of encirclement, yet he was turning to the need for moving over from "war communism" to a fuller democratic socialism. He apparently saw that the new situation required fewer—not more—political curbs.

What is so impressive as we start to re-study this history with clearer insight is how Lenin never hesitated to discard his ideas the moment they began to clash with reality or truth. He was not only alarmed at the centralization of unbridled power in party and government but he also began to see that the form and content of many other parties in the

Third International he had helped create were "too Russian." In my opinion, he would have gone much farther had he lived, for though this International with its "21 points" defining conditions for admission had been based on an estimate of post-World War I that proved wrong, it was not dissolved until some years later.

The claim in the 1920's that "Bolshevism is a model for all" was a dangerously ambiguous one, but it was never intended, even in its inflated form, to mean that the provisional and historically-conditioned answers which Lenin and his followers gave to their problems were anything but that. That goes for such questions as party forms, problems of alliances, attitudes toward non-Marxist groups, democracy, power, forms of people's government, degree and rate of nationalization, farm collectivization, etc. Every single one of these questions must have a different answer in different countries and different times. That is how Marxist thought has viewed the issue. Only after Lenin's death did many of Lenin's local solutions become hardened into something he did not himself call "Marxism-Leninism." Lenin won immortality by refusing to accept as a "guidepost" Kautsky's memorized formulae taken from Marx and Engels about the "necessity" for Socialism to arise first in a Western industrialized country. But even Lenin's answers bear the mark of their epoch, which their triumph helped to create.

WHAT is immortal in scientific Socialism is its historical-materialist method, its confirmed estimate of the relations between the private owners of the industries and their hired workers, of the clash of class interests, of the objective and inevitable contradiction between modern production and the private ownership of that production, of the social necessity for replacing the private ownership (and hence private governmental domination) of the industries with a new basis—social ownership and hence a new social system, a greater democracy, abolition of poverty and insecurity, with the new class guiding the nation's political life. But from this generalized socialist outlook cannot be deduced in advance the party forms, the governmental forms, or any of a hundred other problems of real social change. These can only be arrived at in response to the specific social situation seen in its context of ceaseless change.

The Marxian analysis of imperialism and monopoly made by Lenin is being fulfilled all around us as we read of the shifts in world relations coming from Asia, Africa, from China, India, and the Middle East. But

did anyone think that Lenin's estimates would be good in all details for all the succeeding phases of this era? They are already being altered, and will alter still further, no doubt, as the successful prolongation of peaceful coexistence (not without contradictions, tensions) brings new problems, new relations, now possibilities, new necessities and new contradictions. Far from having all the answers, we do not even have all the questions.

See how history surprises us all the time! Three years ago, the Communists of Asia were convinced that "China's way is the only way." They are not convinced of this any longer, not in India, anymore than Tito's way was Stalin's way or Lenin's way, though the Socialist goal is the same. With what difficulty did Mao succeed finally in changing the disastrous dogma that the Chinese people must make the cities their main battlefield, since this was a revolution led by the working class and were not the workers in the cities? Nor did Mao follow Stalin's mechanically generalized idea that "the main blow" must be aimed at the progressive but non-Communist groupings, an idea useful for a single moment at a single stage in a revolution of a certain country.

It is the scientific method of thought, the change from "subjective politics" to "objective politics" which we are learning the hard way as the new situations face us.

In a way, you might call it a new stage in the constant unfolding of Marxian thought, the Marxism of the generation which has achieved the possibility of prolonged co-existence, constitutional transitions to Socialism by an immense piling up of popular demand, and the growing preponderance of the socialist sector. The Communist movement, despite the gibes of some, has a moral basis of sacrifice, courage, and disinterested devotion to the people's cause; it has a moral capital in the courage of its war-challenging, McCarthy-defying members and leadership. But it cannot rest with this, as it obviously does not intend to do.

OUR national American experience has been more complex than we have grasped. That this national experience was going to defy all the blueprints, old Frederick Engels seemed to sense keenly. He even wrote wryly, as he saw the obstinacy of the German-American Marxists' blueprint mentality, that *"sectarianism cannot be prevented in America for years to come."* (*Letters to Americans,* International Publishers, page 142.) What did he mean by that? My guess is that he was thinking of the very

special way in which social life and social contradictions move in the United States where the democratic heritage and habit of thought are a significant part of the governmental system, so that the people feel their power to make whatever changes they feel necessary though Constitutional means. He was musing, I guess, on the much greater possibilities for class fluidity, the shortage of labor, the free land, all matters he discussed at length. But there was much more to the very special development of the American nation than even he could foresee. For this was not only the country of swift violence against labor, and the country which in the 1929 crash triggered the world economic crisis; it is also the country of the extraordinarily high, though unstable, standard of living and other similar social phenomena. If there is a lack of socialist consciousness among the American working class (which still has limited social aims), surely the cause cannot be only in the lack of "good socialist propaganda," cannot be only in what we have been used to calling "the subjective factor."

It seems that the tough nut Engels was trying his teeth on—*what is the most effective form of organization and activity for Americans with a Marxist outlook*—is still very much with us, even as a good many of his reproaches to the generation of immigrant German Socialists in the 1880-1890's would seem to have much of their relevance. It is an odd and thought-provoking thing to see how accurately Marxian thought has estimated the general course of American national development (concentration of capital, rise of monopoly power, expansionism), and yet how it has misjudged so many of the particular phases of that development.

Even the best Marxist thinkers have been miscalculating the actual course of the *forms* in which the people would make their will and their interests felt. Marx and Engels figured that after the Civil War, and especially after the great strikes of the last decades of the nineteenth century, that there would arise a labor party. The political representatives of Big Capital were able to prevent that by manoeuvers, concessions, or other means. Even Lenin thought that the Progressives of the Theodore Roosevelt days heralded this long-awaited political development. Our own generation has had its own experience with this problem. I do not mean to exhaust this subject or make any prophecies about it or judge it. I merely wish to point out to you how much more complicated the actual course of our history has been than was envisaged in many a socialist blueprint, past and present.

And yet how vigorously have the people made their imprint on our

nations' history, often amid great difficulties and in the face of open violence on a large scale.

Witness the big social movements following the American Revolution, during the Jackson era, the anti-slavery struggle, the rise of the modern trade unions, the New Deal social reforms and such things as TVA, as well as the gains of labor in the post-war decade, the defeat of the Pentagon's system of universal military training, the halting of the Korean War, and their resistance to the domination of the United States by McCarthyites. The Populist movements, the Christian Social Reform movements, the Socialist electoral struggles led by Eugene Debs, and the immense Negro people's movement, are all part of this American panorama in which the forms of the social movement were so varied, so pragmatic, and most often under the influence of a "wrong" theory. And, after all this, while there is still a feeble socialist consciousness, there is a most determined belief in their power to make the government act when social need compels action.

WHEN you think of the new problems—the doubling of national output since 1938, the rise of a broader layer of middle income groups, the unprecedented post-war boom, the possible effects of East-West trade on the economic cycle, not to speak of atomic energy, the H-bomb, and automation—how else than with a scientifically objective and boldly advancing Marxian thought can you tackle all this? How else than by dropping blueprints, both of platform and organization, however hoary or classical, can you hope to make Marxism relevant in terms of millions of Americans whom it can educate and inspire? So we had better start from the beginning, looking at everything again with clear eyes, without apologies and without self-abasement either.

Do you think, for example, that the projected new united parties of Socialism will only be "Marxist-Leninist"? Then they would only be a continuation of the present. But the situation is creating the need for something different, the unity (not all at once, to be sure) of all socialist workers under a single party. Clearly, this will not be the kind of party Lenin created for the highly specialized problems he and his generation faced, though it will be an anti-capitalist party, with groupings within it.

But the point is that the relationship of the Marxian socialist trend of thought within the American people's social movements will again have to be, it seems to me, for a fairly long time something like the "*ferment within the whole,*" of which Engels spoke so often. This is for

the United States, of course, where this particular solution is dictated by our country's actual history up to now, by the present democratic forms in which the conflicts of class interests are expressed, by the present relationship of the socialist-minded minority to the very much larger labor and people's movements. It does not seem likely to me that the necessity for the governmental measures leading to the socialization of the main industrial giants will be seen by the people on the basis of an intolerable mass poverty and deprivation. Our fellow-Americans have seen enough of the possibilities of abundance for all not to surrender themselves helplessly ever again to the crisis miseries of the Thirties. Certainly, this is true in the ranks of the organized industrial workers.

I think, therefore, that Marxian Socialism in our country will be most effective if, while necessarily critical of the claims of capitalism to have provided full democracy, it will be developed as not only the expression of the brotherhood which binds workingmen of all countries in common interests, but also as a further expression of the democratic national development in which the popular aims have always been more and more democracy, more and more economic security, leisure, and individual freedom. The problems that will come to the fore out of the contradictions produced by the enormous productivity of automation industry, and the private monopoly of that industry, are bound to force the issues of socialization, in one form or another, to the center of American politics.

The expectation of constantly rising living standards is rooted among the people, and rightly so; how to achieve this expectation, how to abolish the insecurity which underlies the majority of American families (and not only the working class but the small merchant, farmer, and middle class), how to keep the country advancing along the lines of guaranteeing that modern abundance will be increasingly available to all—that is where Marxian socialism has a tremendous contribution to make to the nation. Because the social development in the United States, both now and in the years to come, is bound to be very different in form (the essential conflict of the billionaires and reaction against the people is always there) from every other country in the world.

Does it not follow that the forms of Marxian socialist education, influence and political activity are bound to have not too much resemblance to the solutions worked out by Marxian socialists in other lands? I think that such is the case. I think that is what Engels meant when he so fervently rapped the German immigrant Marxists who tried in vain to

slap their ready-made answers on the American development, who gave tests in theory to all popular movements and flunked them for not being German-socialist in form and content.

How fervently he criticized those who would "push" history on the basis of their blueprints or their wishes solely. *"As in England,"* he wrote of America, *"all the preaching is of no use until the actual necessity exists."* (page 154). Marx and Engels proclaimed very early this combination of objective politics and the creative role of socialist thought and activity: *"We do not present ourselves to the world as doctrinaires with a new principle, saying 'Here is the truth, bow down before it.' . . . we relate our criticism to the criticism of politics . . . to the real conflicts with which we identify ourselves."*

There is a new and a very old guide-post for your comfort. "Without vision, the people perish." True, true. But without the people, the visions perish, too. Let me know what you think so we can go forward together.

With best wishes,

MILTON HOWARD

A CHANGE OF NAME

BEGINNING WITH OUR SEPTEMBER ISSUE, the name of *Masses and Mainstream* will be changed to *Mainstream.* The former name grew out of the need some ten years ago to merge the politico-cultural weekly, *New Masses* with the literary quarterly, *Mainstream.* It was felt then that, despite the obvious awkwardness of the joint name, it was useful in emphasizing the continuity of tradition of the two publications.

However, we now find that new readers and those coming upon the magazine by chance are puzzled by the name with whose background they are unfamiliar. We are making every effort to reach a wider audience and the simpler name makes this easier. We shall, of course, pursue the same policy as we have before, and try to supply our readers with the best available to us in social and critical thinking, as well as creative writing.—THE EDITORS