

Notes of a Marxist

HAIM KANTOROVITCH

A Note on Marxian Orthodoxy

MARXISM is not based on faith. It exacts no obedience; it knows of no heretics. To disagree with Marx is no crime. One may disagree with Marx on this or that point without losing the right to call himself Marxist. Orthodoxy, if at all applied to Marxism, does not and can not mean blind belief in everything that Marx or Engels ever said. Belief is generally not a Marxian virtue. Marx was no holy prophet. He was a scientist. Great as he was, he may have made mistakes just as Newton, Darwin, Hegel or any other great scientist may have made mistakes. It was Marx himself who warned us against "infallible" science. Science is just as relative, just as fallible, as everything else in the universe. Science is relative, changeable, transient. It carries with it the marks of its epoch. Marxism is a method and not a catechism. The Marxian method is of immense value to the socialist movement if rightly applied to the problems of every day. As soon as it becomes a "holy book" in which every word is sacred, and must be "obeyed", it becomes positively dangerous.

In the discussion on the Declaration of Principles, one "Marxist" argued: we are Marxists, therefore we must understand that it is useless now to "bother" with such remote problems as social revolution, because Marx on a certain occasion said distinctly that it is too early now to discuss these problems. This particular Marxist sees in Marxism a holy scripture that is eternal, immutable, unchangeable. Eighty years ago Marx said that it was too early to discuss the details of the conquest of power. Therefore it will always be too early for these Marxists, because the "holy book" says so.

People who speak about pure Marxism, undiluted Marxism, unrevised Marxism, know very little of the history of Marxism. Marxism has been revised continually, from the left

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as well as from the right. That some people call their revision of Marxism only "interpretations" does not change anything. When the communists are incensed at Kautsky for revising Marx, they do not state the entire truth. The whole truth is that they are angry at Kautsky not because he revised Marx, but because they do not agree with the results of his revision. Lenin "revised" Marx more than Kautsky did, but his revisions are "well taken" because the communists agree with the results of his revision. In the *Labor Monthly*, September, 1934, the communist theoretician L. Rudas makes the following very significant admission:—

"Marx maintained the possibility of peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism for England and America. This view was justifiable at that time, in view of the fact that these countries were states considerably different from the states of other highly developed capitalist countries (for instance, France and Germany). Such a possibility (very rare even in the time of Marx), however, completely disappears during the imperialist period when England and America no longer differ from other imperialist states. Lenin consequently "abandoned" this antiquated opinion of Marx precisely because he regarded Marxism not as a dogma but as a living theory, a manual for action. He abandoned it in consequence of a *deep analysis* of the imperialist period and on the basis of 'new research'."

Here is another example from the same article:

"Or take the following case: Marx and Engels held the view that socialism will come as the result of the simultaneous uprising of the proletariat of the most advanced capitalist countries. Lenin and Stalin prove that this view of Marx and Engels has become antiquated in consequence of certain peculiarities of the imperialist epoch (the unequal development of imperialism, etc.). The deep analysis and new research of Lenin and Stalin show that owing to these changed conditions of the imperialist period the building up of socialism has become possible *in one country with an average development of capitalism.*"

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Many more examples could be furnished in which Lenin and his disciples have "revised" Marx "in consequence of a deep analysis". Space, however, prevents doing so. Besides, it really is not necessary. One may agree or disagree with the changes wrought by Lenin in Marxism, but no one will say that the Marxism of Lenin is "pure" while the Marxism of Kautsky or Otto Bauer is "revised". "It is the rankest injustice to Marx", J. D. H. Cole says: "to suppose that he would have written exactly as he wrote in 1848 or 1859 or 1867 or 1883, if he had been alive and writing today."* The problems that the socialist movement faces today cannot be solved by quotations from Marx. Producing quotations from Marx that he believed in gradualism does not prove that gradualism is possible, just as quotations that Marx believed in armed insurrection do not prove that armed insurrection is possible. Marxism will help us solve our problems, not when we find quotations to strengthen our pet theories, but only when we are able to apply the Marxian method to the realities of our own time. A Marxian analysis of the class interests, class forces and economic conditions of our own contemporary society, will help us much more than the exact knowledge of what Marx said about the class forces and class relations of the society in which he lived.

Marxism and the Concepts of Social Revolution.

It is one thing to disagree with Marx, but it is another to read into Marx what he never said or could not have said. After Lenin had convinced himself that Marx was wrong on certain points, he had a right to replace them with his own theories which he believed to be true. When his disciples however demand that we believe that Lenin's innovations are part of Marxism which one must accept if he is **really** a Marxist, they are wrong. One may or may not accept Lenin's innovations. If he does he accepts Leninism; it has nothing to do with his Marxism. If he refuses to accept Leninism he still

* "What Marx Really Meant", p. 4.

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remains a true Marxist. All that the Leninist may say is that he is just as wrong as Marx was.

The same naturally applies to Kautsky and the revisionists from the right. Kautsky has convinced himself that Marx was wrong on the most important problem in the socialist movement—on the question of social revolution. For decades Karl Kautsky, as the chief exponent of Marxism, believed with Marx and Engels that socialism can be established only as a result of a social revolution. So extreme was he in his belief in the social revolution that he denied the right of any one to call himself "socialist" if he did not accept this belief. In his book "The Social Revolution" Kautsky wrote:

" . . . as each animal creature must at one time go through a catastrophe in order to reach a higher stage of development (the act of birth, breaking of shell), so society can only be raised to a higher stage of development through a catastrophe." *

When Kautsky spoke about the unavoidable "catastrophe", he did not, as he and especially his American disciples do of today, think of it as a bill introduced by a socialist congressman, and adopted by other socialist congressmen who are in a majority. Before Kautsky revised Marxism, he did not believe that the social revolution will be made in and through parliament. In the book quoted above he says:

"The parliament which was formerly the means of pressing the government forward upon the road of progress, becomes ever more and more the means to nullify the little progress that conditions compel the government to make. In the degree that the class which rules through parliamentarism is rendered superfluous and indeed injurious, the parliamentary machinery loses its significance." **

In another book, written much later than the one quoted above, Kautsky says:

"The idea of the gradual conquest of the various departments of the ministry by socialists, is not less absurd

* The Social Revolution, p. 20.

** Ibid, p. 78-79.

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than would be an attempt to divide the act of birth into a number of consecutive monthly acts." *

Kautsky considers those who believe in the possibility of such a gradual growth into socialism, Utopians and social reformers.

"Those who repudiate political revolution as the principal means of social transformation, or wish to confine this to such measures as have been granted by the ruling class, are social reformers, no matter how much their social ideas antagonize existing social forces.**

Kautsky has changed his opinions. He now believes that he was wrong all his life, and only when old age has overtaken him has he seen the "true light". He seems to believe now that "to divide the act of birth into a number of consecutive monthly acts" is not absurd but natural, practical and wise. We do not share Kautsky's new theories. We believe that the Kautsky before 1914 was right, and that the Kautsky of the post-war era is wrong.*** We believe Kautsky to be wrong, and his present theories harmful to the socialist movement however, not because he now disagrees with Marx. Disagreeing with Marx is no crime in itself. Ideas do not become wrong or harmful because Marx said or thought otherwise. We do not share Kautsky's opinions because the experiences of the socialist and labor movement have proved them to be wrong.

History has played a tragic joke on Karl Kautsky. Now, after he has repudiated his entire life work, history has proved that just what he repudiated was right.

Our quarrel with Kautsky, however, is not on why he changed his opinion. That is his private concern. Our quarrel with Kautsky, and many like him, is that they want us to believe that whatever they now believe is the true, the real Marxism. Neither Leninism nor Kautskyism is the "true", the

* "The Road to Power".

** "The Road to Power", pp. 9 and 19.

*** In an article in honor of Kautsky's eightieth birthday, Comrade Abraham Cahan mentions, among other praiseworthy things the fact that the greatness of Kautsky can be seen in the fact that after fighting Bernstein's revisionism practically all his life, he has "at last" convinced himself that Bernstein was right. Forward, Oct. 14, 1934.

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"real" Marxism. For the "true", the "real" Marxism we must still go to Marx himself.

After preaching and defending Marxism as the doctrine of social revolution for many decades, Kautsky in his old age discovered that the evolution of Marxism has gone through at least two distinct stages. It is true Marx was a revolutionist when he was young:

"Opposed as Marx already was at the time of the Communist Manifesto' to the policy of plots and coups des mains preached by the Blanquists, he was still strongly influenced by their Jacobin tradition. In the first month of 1850, in his articles on 'The Class Struggle in France', published in 1895 by Engels in pamphlet form, he regarded the Blanquists as properly the workers' party of France. They above all others held his sympathy."*

That was not "real" Marxism. All the writings of Marx and Engels up to this time, including the "Communist Manifesto", are premature works written while the founders of Marxism were still under the influence of Jacobinism and Blanquism. They later gave up these ideas, especially the idea of social revolution. They realized later that "under conditions of adequate freedom the workers could by their own efforts lift themselves to a high enough level to be able to finally achieve political power not through 'civil strife and foreign wars' but through the class struggle waged by their political and economic mass organization." The reader will notice that "civil strife" is here opposed to class-struggle. A society rended by class-struggle is not in a state of civil strife. There are Jacobins, Blanquists who talk about civil strife, but "we" oppose to it the class-struggle. The real difference between civil strife and class-struggle as understood by Kautsky could have been observed in the practice of the German Social Democratic Party during and after the war, where the class struggle took on the character of peaceful, "civilized" round table discussions.

* Marxism and Bolshevism, in "Socialism, Fascism and Communism", published by the American League for Democratic Socialism.

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These discussions would still be going on, if Hitler had not stopped them.

In his later life, Marx changed many of his ideas, Kautsky assures us. Is this true? Undoubtedly. But is it true also that Marx changed his ideas on social transformation through political revolution? That is not true. In order to change his ideas of social revolution Marx would have had to change his whole philosophy of history of which the idea of social revolutions is an organic part. One cannot remain a dialectical materialist and discard the idea of revolution. Both stand or fall together.

Marxism is revolutionary through and through; neither Marx nor Engels ever discarded the idea of social revolution, nor could they have done so without discarding their belief in the dialectical nature of the social process. Nature as well as history, they argued against the evolutionist—gradualists, proceeds by “jumps”, by sudden cataclysms. The word “sudden” may not be correct here. These “sudden cataclysms” are not really sudden. They are the result of a long chain of slow development, of a long chain of accumulation of quantitative changes. At a certain stage in this process, the quantities suddenly become a new quality. Neither in nature nor in society are these transformations of quantities into qualities easy and peaceful. The old never simply abdicates. Nothing that is alive, whether useful or harmful, dies willingly. It clings to life, it fights for its existence. Inorganic matter fights for its existence by resisting destruction, living beings by fighting back. Whatever has outlived its natural function and therefore its usefulness, has no chance in this fight, but it will fight, and fight hard. The superiority of the new is precisely the fact that it is new. It has the promise of tomorrow as its guiding star. But the old has tradition behind it. It has the strength of centuries behind it. It has its forces trained and ready. At times it may seem that the old will triumph, but this is an illusion. It may have temporary victories, but a permanent victory is prohibited for it by nature itself. Nothing is eternal, nothing is immutable, nothing is immortal. Everything is changeable,

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finite, mortal. What is must always make place for what is to be. Poets may decry this tragic fact of reality, sentimentalists may shed tears over the fact that whatever lives must die, but this is nature's way. This is how she manages her domain. Nature does not know of life without death, of light without darkness, of sweet without bitter, of good without bad. Everything has its opposite, and it is the clash of opposites that drives life forward, and gives birth to new systems. Social systems, just like individuals, have their childhood, youth, old age, decline and death. A skillful doctor can, in some cases, prolong the life of a dying man for a short while. Fascism is trying to do the same for capitalist society. It may succeed for a while, it may score a temporary victory, but it cannot stave off its inevitable death.

Marx and Engels fought against the ideas of the romantic revolutionaries of their time, the Bakuninists, Blanquists and others, not because they did not share their ideas that a social revolution is inevitable, but because they did not share their romantic—"putchist" ideas of revolution. Marx and Engels never gave up their idea of social revolution, but they did not believe that revolutions can be made artificially according to a plan decided on by a congress in Moscow or Paris. Revolutions, Marx and Engels knew, are not made at will, in fact they are not "made" at all. Revolution is not an act, it is a process. It grows and gathers strength for generations. The problem for the revolutionary party is to find its place in the growing revolution, to use the growing revolutionary forces for its own purpose, and direct the revolutionary process in its own channels.

The Road to Power.

The idea of an armed insurrection to destroy the state, as Bakunin and his followers believed, or to capture and use the state, as Blanqui hoped, are not really dead yet, though both Bakuninism and Blanquism are practically dead.* Many of its elements have become important constituent elements of con-

* See R. W. Postgate, "Out of the Past", on Blanquism.

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temporary communist theory. The fact that these elements are paraded as Marxism does not change their essential character. The program of the Communist International still maintains that there is only one way for the working class to conquer political power. This one way is the way of the armed insurrection.

Marx and Engels did not share this view. They did not believe that there is, or there can be, any one exclusive royal road to power. The first step in the social revolution is for the working class to conquer political power, to get control of the state machinery, to constitute itself "the ruling class". But how can the working class conquer political power? Marx and Engels knew of no universal principle that could be applied for this purpose everywhere and at all times. At the close of the Hague Congress of the First International Marx said that in countries like England and the United States the revolution will probably be peaceful and democratic, in Germany it will be bloody, and as to Holland, he did not want to commit himself, because he explained, he did not know enough about the country, its traditions, its circumstances, etc.

History may reverse Marx's dictum on this or that particular country. It may happen that just in those countries where he expected the revolution to be peaceful, the revolutions may turn out to be the bloodiest. But neither history, nor sophistry can "reverse" Marx's belief that there is more than one way to power for the working class. The methods by which the working class will attain political power will not depend on the decisions of a socialist or communist congress. It will not follow the "blue print of revolution" prepared by a revolutionary party, or theoretically predicted by a theoretician, whether it be a Marx or a Lenin. The tactics and strategy of the proletarian revolution will be determined by the objective conditions under which the decisive battles in the class struggle will be fought. It will be determined by the relation of forces within the capitalist state; by the conditions, economic, political and cultural of the country; by its international position; and last but not least by the deeply rooted

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national traditions and national psychology of every given country.

"The class struggle," the Communist Manifesto says, "is of necessity at first limited to national boundaries. The proletariat of every country must fight first of all its own national bourgeoisie," etc.

No one, we hope, will accuse Marx and Engels of a "nationalistic deviation" on account of this. Socialism for them always was, and could be nothing else but international. But Marxism is realistic to the core. As realists, Marx and Engels realized that while the good for which socialists fight is international, the fight itself will of necessity have to be fought within national boundaries, and will therefore have to adapt itself not only to the different political and economic conditions of every country, but also to its ways and customs. What may be good and effective tactics in one country may turn out to be suicidal tactics in other countries. The sad experiences that the Communist International had in trying to enforce its "mechanical unity of thought and action" on the international communist movement is best proof of this.

The rising tide of democracy, which Marx and Engels witnessed, led them, especially Engels, to believe that "The rebellion of the old style, the street fight behind barricades, which up to 1848 has prevailed, has become antiquated." Engels even warns the working class that "the ruling classes, by some means or another, would get us where the rifle pops and saber slashes." A lifetime of study, observation and experience in the socialist movement led him to the conclusion that "the time is past when revolutions can be carried through by small minorities at the head of unconscious masses." *

The period of revolution and counter-revolution in post-war Europe, the tragic failures of the many attempted minority revolutions of the communists, have fully proved the truth and wisdom of Engels' judgment. An armed insurrection, not only of a minority, but even of a majority, under normal circumstances,

* Fr. Engels, *The Revolutionary Act* (preface to Marx "Civil War in France"). Labor News Co., N. Y.

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that is when the capitalist state is not decayed and its forces demolished, is even less possible in our time than it was while Marx and Engels were alive. No proletarian party, no matter how well organized and disciplined and "prepared" for the revolution, can ever hope to be successful in an open war against a modern state with its modern military technique.

The lessons that the socialist movement has learned from its tragic experiences in post-war Europe, were summed up by the present writer elsewhere in the following words:

"There is no one way in which the proletariat may get political power. It may get political power as a result of the utter collapse of the existing state machinery as in Russia; as a result of a revolution brought about by a defeat in war as in Germany; as a result of a successful revolution as in Spain; or as a result of an electoral victory as in Great Britain." * It will all depend on when, where and under what circumstances the transfer of power will take place.

Those who love to speak about armed insurrection (it sounds so revolutionary!) in our time, have however failed up to now to discuss the possibility of such uprisings and its chances for success. They, also, choose the easiest way. They simply find a sentence somewhere in a letter by Marx or Engels, that "shows" that Marx shared their opinion, and they forget that revolutions and armed uprisings are not made by sentences from Marx or Lenin.

* "Towards Socialist Reorientation", American Socialist Quarterly, Vol. II, No. 4. Autumn 1933.

A WORD ABOUT OUR CONTRIBUTORS

Norman Thomas

Candidate for U. S. Senator from New York; member of the N.E.C.

David Felix

Active member Local Philadelphia, Socialist Party; delegate from the U. S. to the Labor and Socialist International Congress, Paris, 1933.

James Oneal

Editor, "New Leader" member of the N.E.C.