

In Defense of Theory

By Hyman Lumer

THERE IS NO doubt that we have long been guilty of a dogmatic doctrinaire approach to Marxist-Leninist theory. We have tended to take the letter of the Marxist-Leninist classics for the essence of their ideas. We have tended to view these writings not as the foundation of an expanding, growing body of scientific thought, but as constituting in all essential respects the totality of the theory. And we have tended, in consequence, to elevate minor theoretical propositions to the level of fundamental principles.

Even while inveighing against such an approach and repeatedly asserting that theory must be treated as a guide to action, we have all too often used this guide in a thoroughly Talmudic fashion. For this we have, of course, had to pay a price. Included in it is a static body of theory which has shown little growth and which, with the march of history, becomes increasingly inadequate as a guide to action. Included, too, is a heritage of false partisanship which, instead of looking all facts in the face and using them as a test of theory, tends often to seek out those facts which fit the accepted doctrine.

Obviously, these distortions in our use of theory are sorely in need of correction, and the fact that much of the current discussion centers around the re-examination of basic theoretical concepts is greatly to be welcomed. However, if such a re-examination is to produce anything positive, it must be based on a firm grasp of scientific method and the nature of scientific theory. Without this, the same faulty conception of theory which contributed to our dogmatism can well lead us into the opposite pitfall, namely the negation of theory. And it must be said that trends leading in this direction, in the name of correcting theory and bringing it up to date, have become all too widespread.

The most extreme form is that which simply equates theory with dogma, and argues that to rid ourselves of dogmatism we must rid ourselves of dependence on theory itself. The latter is regarded as a set of shackles which bind us rigidly and prevent us from taking an uninhibited, creative approach to problems. It is being tied to theory, say the proponents of this view, that leads us into error. "How can Marx-

ism-Leninism be of any real value," they ask, "if it leads us to make so many serious mistakes? Would we not be better off to base ourselves simply on practical experience and good common sense, and to use the theory only as an adjunct?"

These people attribute the mistakes arising from the misuse of theory to the supposed faultiness of theory as such. They resemble the driver who wrecks a car through his own incompetence, then explains the wreck by saying: "They don't build them the way they used to any more."

Such outright downgrading of the value of theory requires little comment. It is an expression of the traditional American disdain for theory which lies at the root of pragmatism. It is characteristic, in particular, of the American labor movement, with its insistence on "hard-headed practicality." To base the activities of the Party on such an approach would be to reduce its ideological level to that of the spontaneous movement of the working class. Needless to say, such a party could hardly be called a party of scientific socialism.

Another, though not so obvious, version of the same tendency is the notion that re-evaluation of theory consists simply in sorting out theoretical propositions and discarding those which are invalid. "We will take from Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin those propositions which are valid," say the advocates of this approach, "and reject those which are not."

To test the correctness of every proposition is, of course, necessary. But *taken by itself*, this leads only to a thinning-out of the body of theory, to seeing how much of it we can discard. In the end it leads to a negation of theory, for it is based on the fallacious idea that a body of theory is merely a conglomeration of independent propositions which can be sorted into two piles—"correct" and "incorrect."

If we pursue this to its logical conclusion, we can say with equal justification that we will take from Keynes those of his ideas which are valid, and similarly from theoreticians of other schools those of their ideas which are valid. For there are undoubtedly valid propositions to be found in all of these writings. But the result of such a process will not be a body of theory. On the contrary, it can only be an eclectic mishmash seeking to reconcile conflicting schools of thought. It is this approach, for example, which underlies the efforts being made in some quarters to reconcile the theories of Marx and Keynes.

However, a body of theory is not a pile of propositions but a logically interconnected whole. Its foundation is a set of fundamental laws or generalizations pertaining to the entire field of interest. On this foundation is built a complex superstructure or hierarchy of lesser laws and principles applying to limited segments of the field. The validity of all these is, of course, determined by their correspondence to observed facts and

by the ability they confer on us to make correct predictions from these facts in given situations.

Every such body of theory is constantly expanding with the accumulation of new observations and new experiences, and in the course of this its more basic principles are also enlarged, or modified, or subsumed under still broader generalizations. We can correct, elaborate or scrap these propositions in the light of greater experience. But we cannot deal with them as isolated entities.

We cannot modify or scrap a given proposition without taking into account its ramifications and logical relations to other propositions. A principle which is derived as a logical conclusion from certain others cannot be rejected without also rejecting its premises. Some of the efforts to pick out certain aspects as valid and to question or reject others tend to overlook this.

Thus, Comrade Gates writes in his article "Time for a Change" (*Political Affairs*, November, 1956, p. 51):

The issue is to determine what remains valid, such as the materialist conception of history, surplus value, the class struggle, the leading role of the working class in the struggle for Socialism, imperialism as capitalism in its monopoly, dying stage, the national and colonial question, for example, and what is no longer valid, such as the law of inevitable violent proletarian revolution, the inevitability of war, or needs to be modified, like the theory of the state, etc.

It is wrong to place on a par such a cornerstone of Marxist theory as historical materialism and individual, derivative propositions relating to the inevitability or non-inevitability of violent revolution or war under specific conditions. To modify or reject the latter in keeping with changed conditions is a necessary part of the application and development of Marxism, but to reject the former would be to reject Marxism itself.

Further, before proceeding to modify such a basic concept as the theory of the state, one must recognize that it is not unrelated to the other basic aspects of Marxism, and that changing it may necessitate modification or even abandonment of these. Comrade Gates does not explain what he means by "modification," but what is often meant by others who advocate it is discarding or emasculating the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Let us see what this entails.

Fundamental to the whole of Marxist theory is dialectical materialism. The laws of dialectics are simply the laws of change and development—of the motion of matter—expressed in their most general terms. They provide a method, an approach, applicable to the study of all phenomena. The application of this approach to human society leads to the basic principles of historical materialism, which form the foundation for the whole of Marxist social science.

In his introduction to the *Communist*

nist Manifesto, Engels expresses this in the following paragraph:

The *Manifesto* being our joint production, I consider myself bound to state that the fundamental proposition which forms its nucleus belongs to Marx. That proposition is: That in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently the whole history of mankind (since the dissolution of primitive tribal society, holding land in common ownership) has been a history of class struggles, contests between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed classes; that the history of these class struggles forms a series of evolutions in which, nowadays, a stage has been reached where the exploited and oppressed class—the proletariat—cannot attain its emancipation from the sway of the exploiting and ruling class—the bourgeoisie—without at the same time, and once and for all, emancipating society at large from all exploitation, oppression, class distinctions and class struggles.

From this fundamental proposition is elaborated the entire Marxist conception of the class struggle, and *with it* the Marxist conception of the state as the instrument of the ruling class for maintaining its rule—as the dictatorship of the ruling class. And from this, in turn, arises the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat as the instrument of the working class, having achieved political power, for establishing socialism and

abolishing classes altogether.

This is not true, however, of those propositions which are conclusions reached by applying the basic Marxist concepts to specific situations (such, for example, as the *form* of the proletarian dictatorship). Such conclusions hold only where the particular conditions exist; where these change, the application of the same basic laws may yield quite different conclusions.

Thus, on the basis of his analysis of imperialism, Lenin showed that certain conclusions reached earlier by Marx and Engels were no longer valid (for example, that socialism must develop first in the most highly industrialized countries, or that it could not be established in one country alone). He did so, however, not by discarding the basic Marxist laws of capitalist development, but by *proceeding from them*.

In the same way, the basic features of imperialism, operating within a given relationship of forces, lead to the conclusion that imperialist wars are inevitable, whereas in a changed relationship of forces they give rise to the conclusion that such wars are *not* inevitable. But in both cases the conclusions are reached on the basis of the same fundamental laws of monopoly capital. The same may be said of the conclusions regarding the presence or absence of violence in the course of the transition to socialism (that is, aside from the *advocacy* of violent means, which was never a part of Marxism-Leninism).

There is another form of negation of theory, which has its roots in a mistaken notion of what is meant by "interpretation" of theoretical concepts. "We will accept the principles of Marxism-Leninism," it is asserted, "not as rigid propositions laid down by someone else, but as *we* interpret them. We will decide for ourselves what are and what are not fundamental principles. And unless we are free to interpret theory in the light of present-day realities, it becomes a mere dogma."

To be sure, there is a valid meaning of interpretation of scientific principles, in the sense of judging their significance and applicability in given circumstances. The need for such interpretation arises of necessity out of the practical application of the theory—out of its employment as a basis for deciding questions of policy and program. In particular, when a political party seeks consciously to base its activities on scientific principles, it is necessary to arrive at collective judgments as to how these principles are to be understood and applied to specific practical problems.

But it does not at all follow from this that we can arbitrarily decide what are and what are not basic principles of a particular body of theory, or that theoretical principles can mean whatever we interpret them to mean. Such an approach is profoundly unscientific. And unfortunately, the formulations in both the Draft Resolution and the Draft Constitution lend themselves to such

an erroneous meaning.*

It is an obvious fallacy to think that the Communist Party or any other organization or individual can act as an arbiter of the truth or falsity of scientific propositions. This kind of approach leads to a denial of the objective validity of science.

The objective laws of nature and society are what they are. Our task is to uncover them, to learn to understand and use them. If our policy is based on a correct knowledge of these laws, it will be effective and will lead toward the results we seek; if it is not, it will lead us into a morass. This is the meaning of Engels' well-known aphorism: "Freedom is the recognition of necessity."

The test of theory is its correspondence to the observed facts—to practical experience. This requires painstaking examination and analysis of factual evidence, which is essential to the verification of theory, correction of errors and the development of new theory. Without it, debate becomes aimless and goes round in a circle, as has become true of much of the current discussion.

To be sure, we have in the past committed the error of looking to

*The Draft Resolution states (p. 56): "Being ourselves on these Marxist-Leninist principles as interpreted by the Communist Party of our country, we must learn much better how to extract from the rich body of the theory that which is universally valid, combining it with the specific experiences of the American working class in the struggle for socialism in the United States."

The preamble of the Draft Constitution states: "The Communist Party bases its theory generally on the cultural heritage of mankind and particularly on the teachings of the giants of scientific socialism, Karl Marx, Frederick Engels and V. I. Lenin, as interpreted by the Party and creatively applied and developed in accordance with the conditions of the American class struggle, traditions and customs."

certain other Communist Parties as absolute authorities on what are and what are not basic theoretical principles, and this needs to be corrected. We cannot do so, however, by simply shifting the mantle of "interpreter" to the shoulders of the Communist Party of the United States; this only continues the same error in another way. What is needed is to discard this erroneous approach altogether, and the formulations in the Draft Resolution and Draft Constitution should be changed toward this end.

This is not to say that the Communist Party should not take a position on theoretical questions. It means rather than its position must be based on the necessary research and development of theory, not alone on discussion and voting, if it is to lead to correct policy.

The negation of theory, whatever its form, arises in part from a failure to understand clearly the nature of dogmatism. It is, in fact, the other side of the coin. If dogmatism ascribes to all theoretical propositions an equal status of universality andponents of it insist equally on theponents of it insist equally on the right to degrade all concepts to the same level of questionable validity, or to ascribe our own meanings to them. At the same time, others, leaping to the defense of Marxism-Leninism, take up the cudgels for dogmatism and attack virtually every proposed theoretical change as tantamount to abandoning Marxism altogether. Both are, of course, wrong.

A correct approach to theory lies along neither of these paths.

The starting point of all theoretical work and development today must be the body of proven theory which already exists. For there does exist an extensive body of Marxist-Leninist science which has stood the tests of both logical consistency and conformity with observed facts, and which has served as an instrument for the successful building of socialism. It is this body of theory which we must interpret, apply and build upon.

Any attempts to chop out basic propositions from it or to "interpret" them to suit subjective inclinations in place of objective study and analysis can lead only to rejection of Marxism-Leninism. This, of course, anyone who so chooses is free to do. But he has no right to do it in the name of "creative Marxism."

There are some who contend that a *basic* revision of theory is required because we live in a totally new historical period—a period which not only Marx and Engels but also Lenin never envisioned. We are no longer, they say, in the era of wars and revolutions of which Lenin spoke, but are on the threshold of a new era of peaceful coexistence and peaceful transition to socialism. Furthermore, Lenin's writings were directed not only to a specific historical era, but also in very large part to the specific problems and conditions of Russia.

There is no doubt that the post-war years have witnessed momen-

tous changes in the world relationship of forces, with the emergence of many qualitatively new features. There is also no doubt that our theory has sadly lagged behind these historical developments — that we have sought to tackle postwar problems with prewar theory, a state of affairs to which our dogmatism and lack of creative theoretical work have greatly contributed. With the full crystallization of the new world situation, and with the accumulation of our own errors, this lag has become so acute as to compel a thoroughgoing re-examination of our theoretical position.

But we are still living in the era of imperialism, of dying capitalism in a state of deepening general crisis. We are still in what Lenin described as the final stage of capitalism, the epoch of the world transition to socialism. The basic features of imperialism which he defined still exist, even though in the new relationship of forces some of their *consequences* may be different.

Nor can it be said that Lenin's theories were directed simply to the special conditions then prevailing in Russia. This is plainly not true of his theory of imperialism. No more is it true of his concept of Party organization. The struggles which he led in Russia for a new type of party were part of a fight against Social-Democratic opportunism which was developing in a number of countries. And in order to deal with the particular problems of party organization in Russia, he had

first of all to lay down certain more general features of a working-class party of socialism.

Among these, he showed, is the need for a vanguard type of party, armed with the Marxist theory of scientific socialism and possessing a high degree of unity and discipline, as against the loose, reformist election machines which the existing Social-Democratic parties had become. In its essential features, this is no less true today than it was when Lenin first formulated it.

We have, of course, habitually mistaken Lenin's specifically Russian application of these ideas for universal truths. But to scrap such fundamental concepts is not to *advance* but to *abandon* Marxism-Leninism. Any genuine theoretical advance must take them as its point of departure. To eliminate them is to deprive Marxist theory of its revolutionary core, to emasculate it.

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One prerequisite of theoretical advance, therefore, is the mastery of existing theory. And it must be admitted that in this respect we have been seriously lacking. Study of theory in our ranks, never one of our strongest points, has undergone a drastic decline during the past six years. Indeed, much of our present theoretical inadequacy is due to these past shortcomings. Consequently, much of the present demand for re-evaluation of theory is raised with only a hazy notion of what is to be reevaluated, and hence, much of the discussion assumes a

superficial, aimless character.

A second and related, prerequisite is encouragement and organization of original theoretical work. This should not be the domain of a handful of "specialists" who are utterly divorced from practical problems, but should be developed in conjunction with our practical work. Nor can we count on such work being done spontaneously, in odd moments, by people busy with a thousand other tasks. It must be *organized*, and in such a way as to make the best use of the considerable resources at our disposal for Marxist research and scholarship.

Furthermore, it is necessary to provide an atmosphere which encourages the freest discussion and clash of ideas. Nowhere is this so essential as here, on the very frontiers of new knowledge and theory.

Some assert that our theoretical shortcomings are due largely to a failure to study the American scene. This is not entirely true. One could compile a fairly impressive list of such writings. But these could and should be far more numerous. They have been limited both in scope and number by our dogmatism and our discouragement of departures from the accepted pattern of thinking.

Those who accepted the established mode of thought found their path relatively easy, but those who did not found it very difficult. This

was strikingly demonstrated in the genetics controversy, in which those who supported the Lysenko school received every encouragement, while those who questioned it in any degree found themselves subjected to a barrage of pressure and criticism which eventually discouraged all but the most hardy from speaking out. Had there been an atmosphere of free discussion, of genuine give-and-take, we could have avoided the extreme positions which were arrived at on some questions and have come much closer to the truth on these questions than we actually did.

The correction of our errors is not an overnight task, but is rather an extended process. In the Chinese Communist Party, the liquidation of doctrinairism, beginning in 1935, took a period of fully ten years. Nor will our mistakes be corrected simply because we recognize them and have a will to correct them. It is also necessary to know *how* to do so, to know what the correct path is. And this requires the development of a truly scientific approach to theory—one which avoids both the dogmatic defense of every comma in the Marxist classics and the negation of theory in the name of freedom from dogmatism. Such an approach to the study and creative expansion of Marxist-Leninist theory is essential to the future of the socialist movement in our country.