Can Marxism Survive?

After the fall of Stalinism, there is an enormous debate on the left about the validity of traditional Marxist concepts. This debate involves questions about the role and nature of the working class, the environment, women's oppression, planning and the market and what production and consumption will look like in a socialist society.

Here Michael Löwy, well-known author of numerous works on Marxist theory and a leader of the Fourth International, attempts to answer some of these questions.

The impact, for now is, fundamentally negative. As the dominant tendency, we frequently come across accelerated ideological decomposition. We are seeing a revision which is not only theoretical, which is good, but also political, philosophical, and ethical, and all these things dilute the fundamental values (which justify the Marxist inspiration of the workers') and socialist movements' leading them an empty shell.

In this field, on one side we have frequent attempts to reconcile Marxist thought with aspects of bourgeois thought, like utilitarianism, rationalism in an individualist version, positivism, or political and social liberation. This tendency is attractive to a number of currents or mass political parties from the Italian PDS (ex-communist party), to small intellectual groups in Europe and Latin America (for example, so-called analytical marxists).

On the other side, there is a strengthening of dogmatic positions, though this is not the dominant tendency. This involves mechanical reaffirmations of fundamental principles of Marxism, Marxisms-Leninism and Trotskyism, rejecting every attempt to consider the new reality, current events or changes.

A certain vulgarization of Marxism is being reaffirmed. Faced with anything new which questions established theories, it replies with abstractions. Some sections of the left are looking for simple, dogmatic, classical and monolithic truths which don't cause problems.
But is there a movement to renew Marxism?

Yes, there is a certain renewal. A quite positive element is the rediscovery of the Frankfurt School. This is an evolution by a new generation of intellectuals from Europe, the United States, and Latin America, of the critique which made it the western paradigm of modernity. This implies a deepening and radicalisation of Marxism, away from its original, critical, and oppositional aspect of the world. That is extremely important; we are questioning many ideas, like the development of productive forces being positive, or the domination of humans over nature forming part of our emancipation from work. These ideas were inherited from the Enlightenment and the ideology of progress amongst Marxists, and are being questioned.

This has very important political consequences. The current ecological crisis is a direct threat to the survival of every living organism on the planet, not only to our ‘little biped mammal’ Homo sapiens. It is a new problem, which Marx and Engels were unaware of. Because of this, we need to re-examine, for example, the concepts of productive force, progress, technology, as a neutral element, and the idea of domination over nature. A re-evaluation is needed, but one which leads to a radicalising of our critique of modern industrial civilisation and a strengthening of opposition to it. There is a sense of urgency in this; our civilisation is leading us to a mass suicide.

Declining importance of labour?

What do you think of the fashionable theory, which characterises the new stage of capitalism by the decline in the importance of work? There are two aspects to this. The first is economic, with the increase in organic composition of science, technology, machinery, robotics and computers now having more importance and the progressive decline of variable capital and of wage labour.

This is a process which has been developing for a long time, with the so-called ‘third industrial revolution’. But to deduce sociological consequences from this, as Andre Gorz has done—he says that the workforce no longer has any role, that it has disappeared—descends into economism. These visions confuse the working class as a whole with a specific part, the industrial workers and with the classical production line; this position becomes more and more anachronistic, and its political consequences are very dangerous.

There still exists a large working class but, nevertheless, capitalism is continually penetrating, on an unprecedented scale, numerous fields from which it was previously absent. Enzo Maudè is right when he says we are seeing an enormous expansion of the working class, of those who are forced to sell their labour in order to live.

The second aspect is that there is a large underclass of people becoming marginalised by the system. In Europe, as in the First World as a whole, there is now a large number of people living on the margins of society. The uprising in Los Angeles is an example of this.

But the problem is much greater in Latin America and the Third World as a whole. Today, it is clear that alongside the growth of the working class there is also a growing number of poor people, people permanently or temporarily excluded from production, consumption and society as well.

There are people who make a living from small businesses, as itinerant traders, as self-employed, or from prostitution, crime, and the drugs trade; everything is getting worse. This is a big challenge not only to the theory but also to the practice of liberation. The problem is to get unity between those groups of people, which I call the ‘poor proletariat’, with the organised working class.
Socialism and the western industrial paradigm

On the other hand there exists, within the socialist movement, and within the whole thought of Marx, a vision in which the continuity between modern industrial civilisation and socialism is understood in an excessively one-sided fashion.

That is a complex question. The idea of Marxism is that the working class is the saviour of the most advanced gains of the bourgeoisie, of rationalism, of the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

The working class movement will achieve the promises that bourgeois progress did not carry out. That idea is legitimate so we cannot understand socialism without this element from the Enlightenment. As Ernest Bloch says, concepts such as liberty, equality and fraternity contain a utopian excess which goes far beyond the bourgeois perspective and which will be realised by socialism.

Communal alternatives to capitalist individualism

Socialism is both the inheritance of rationalism and the Enlightenment and of the Romantic criticism of the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

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Working class counter-culture in retreat

But today we are seeing a retreat of working class counter-culture. Capitalism is destroying references to pre-capitalist life in Brazil. In one or two generations, this will have disappeared.

That is true. But the overall functioning of capitalism is provoking, as a reaction against atomisation, a searching for communal life. It is obvious that this searching often leads nowhere. This is one of the reasons for the enormous successes of the Peasant sects in Latin America, who give a sense of communal identity to the individual abandoned in the capitalist desert, where they don't feel part of anything. It is up to us to offer other alternatives.

Scientific socialism and revolutionary 'utopianism'

What is the challenge we face in re-establishing a socialist project and a utopian perspective, with the credibility and social weight the transformation of society?

Marx and Engels lived at a time when the problem of a utopia appeared an anachronism. For them the most important question was to develop the contradictions within capitalism, the class struggle.

That remains true. But today we are no longer in a situation in which we can say we don't know what socialism will look like. We can't maintain this attitude in the face of the terrible burden of 70 years of 'actually existing socialism'.

The credibility of the socialist project demands of us the production of an attractive vision of socialism, explaining that it has nothing to do with the so-called 'actually existing socialism'.

To return to Ernest Bloch, today scientific socialism has also to be utopian socialism, in a quasi-etymological sense, which does not exist anywhere at present. If we want our answer to be credible, we must explain what it is to change the face of capitalism or the pseudo-'actually existing socialism', why it is worth risking our lives in this struggle.

We have to give an explanation to our militants, to workers, women, youth. Without revolutionary utopias there will not be a revolution in practice. We need to go much farther along this road. Obviously we don't want to start from scratch. There is a wealth of knowledge accumulated by Marxists in which we need to develop. There are also historical experiences with all their limits and mistakes, with all our discussions about the nature of socialist democracy in the transition to socialism, etc.

But we must be open and prepared to learn from others such as the utopian and various other socialists, and anarchists.

They have ideas and experiences which are important for the discussion about the kind of socialism we want.

We have to relate to these ideas, as well as new problems that arise, such as ecological questions and feminism.

We need to start to elaborate - whether in a programmatic or a literary form - thoughts, reflections, projections, dreams made real by Bloch, say what a socialist future would be. It is important in this rediscovery of the utopian dimension of some Marxist ideas, for example, in what way will production under socialism be for use values and not exchange values, this is an idea with tremendous utopian potential.

What does this mean for production, for consumption? The problem is how to abandon an established viewpoint and try to see things from a different point of view. And, finally, we must recognise that we don't have answers for everything, on some questions we are just fumbling around in the darkness.

Michael Löwy was interviewed by the editorial team of Im Tempo (Brazil).

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