

EULOGY BESIDE AN EMPTY GRAVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE FUTURE OF SOCIALISM

RICHARD LEVINS

The starting point for examining the present situation is the acknowledgement that we – all who struggle for a humane, cooperative and supportive society – have suffered a defeat of immense proportions. I do not refer here to the toppling of discredited governments in eastern Europe. That merely ratifies a process that has been going on for decades. We see this defeat in:

*The failure to build an alternative world system that could confront imperialism and support the break away of third world countries. This leaves the world capitalist system with its uneven exchange, debt slavery, profit maximizing allocation of investment and dictation of economic policy within formally sovereign states as the only international economic system.

*The failure to demonstrate a clearly superior way of life, more democratic, rational, creative and fulfilling as well as more egalitarian than the society it replaced.

*The absence of an international movement with a strategy or perspective or even the goal of overthrowing capitalism. The defiant 'we'll bury you!' of the **1950's** has become the whimper 'please, please take us in!' Half a century ago, my grandmother could assure me that my grandchildren **would** live in a socialist republic. It now seems unlikely.

*The replacement of bullshit Marxism by bullshit liberalism as the dominant discourse in the East, with the adoption of liberal vocabularies and **hardline** 18th century doctrines of private enterprise. This has been accompanied by the retreat from the bold goals of changing social relations, new ways of relating to work, the complete emancipation of women, the struggle against racism, the critique of science and religion.

*The squandering within a few years in power of the support of tens of millions of people, won by the heroism, sacrifice, dedication and ingenuity of millions of communist men and women. It is almost forgotten now that Communist-led resistance movements liberated Yugoslavia and Albania from the Nazi occupation without the help of Soviet troops, that the Communists won the 1946 elections in Czechoslovakia, that communist

Georgi Dimitrov was the most popular political leader in Bulgaria after the Second World War and that the Chinese revolution was the victory of the overwhelming majority of the peasants and workers.

This leaves us, those of us who do not believe that exploitation is either inevitable or rational or that greed is the highest organizing principle for social relations, in the role of a rearguard, defending the gains of 150 years of struggle, acknowledging the reality of the defeat and evaluating the reasons for it, regrouping and preparing for the second wave of revolutionary upsurge. It is an agenda of years and decades.

In order to understand the present situation we have to be able to look at it at several different magnifications. The lowest magnification, like looking through the wrong end of a telescope, sees a world historic scale of centuries. We do not see a grand march through the classic modes of production from lower to higher but a curious zigzag. We would see incipient capitalisms emerge and subside time and again: Bohemia under the Taborites during the Reformation, Egypt under Mohammed Ali in the 19th **century**, pre-British Bengal. We would see the rebirth of feudalism in 16th century Poland and of capitalism in late **20th** century Poland.

When detail is lost we see the rise and fall of social systems, the birth of capitalism and imperialism, the industrial revolution and modern science, the development of bourgeois law and consciousness until they rise to the rank of common sense, the imposition of slavery and the invention of racism, the attempts to resist capitalism from behind or to overthrow it from in front. On this scale, the four internationals and the labour movement are seen not distinctly but as one massive movement that has ebbed and flowed over the last two hundred years. The victories and defeats are shared by all of us. Then the often bitter conflicts among revolutionaries are barely visible as passing aspects of social evolution and Emma **Goldman** and Rosa Luxemburg are sisters.

One analogy for the present time is the Europe of 1814. The French revolution, long since lapsed into the Napoleonic empire, had nevertheless continued to overturn feudal aristocratic ways and even inspired rebellions such as the Haitian Revolution that it tried to suppress. The Henry Kissinger of the time, the Austrian Metternich, organized monarchical Europe to celebrate the end of the Revolution and restore stability. But it was not the Bourgeois Revolution that fell at Waterloo, only Napoleon. Fifteen years later the aristocracy was out of power again in France, and 34 years later the new wave of a more radical revolutionary upsurge was shaking the foundations of European privilege.

At an intermediate magnification we see changing class configurations and their political expressions in different countries, the defeat of direct colonialism and the rise of neocolonialism to offset that defeat on a world scale (with important exceptions such as Puerto **Rico** and the West Bank and **Gaza** where direct colonial rule continues), the victories and defeats of

particular revolutionary movements, the broad extension of formal political rights and of the rulers' skills at manipulating their exercise, the growing disparity between rich and poor countries, the similarities and differences among revolutionary societies and the rise of new emancipatory movements as political actors.

At high magnification we have to evaluate programmes of movements, parties and individuals. The blurred stream of history now comes apart. Interests and beliefs are seen in their expression as policies, and **allies** in the historical project meet as adversaries in the struggle to build the movement in accord with very different perceptions.

Each of these perspectives is necessary. We have to shift back and forth **among** them, but always being clear about what level of magnification we are working on.

In acknowledging the pervasiveness of this defeat we should not lose sight of the victories which had been won both by the socialist movements and by the first revolutionary societies. The socialist movement and the labour movement it inspired and helped to build established at least the elementary rights for the working class and moved the masses of the world to become actors in political life. This is a crowning achievement.

The first attempt to build socialism has been successful in some ways: the equitable allocation of scarcity, the rapid emergence from extreme poverty, the development of social consumption in health, education, cultural life; the **rupture** of some traditional forms of sexism and the achievement of more equitable participation by women in most occupations and in political life. It has reallocated resources in such a way as to reduce rather than increase the economic disparities among geographic regions. It initially unleashed great cultural creativity and mass participation in public life; and pioneered in raising issues such as the protection of nature, although all of these were aspirations which it could not follow through on systematically.

However it failed to overtake and surpass world capitalism economically on its own terms, providing more abundant consumer goods and services. This would not be a disaster in itself if the terms of the competition had been effectively challenged with alternative patterns of consumption and standards for validating people's lives as satisfactory and fulfilling. The relative equality (even with the privileges usurped by managers and leaders, these societies are far more egalitarian than capitalism), the priorities of social consumption in education, health, and culture, the absence of unemployment and cyclic crises, a commitment to a rational planned development based on examining human need as a whole, could be the basis for a viable set of alternative aspirations even in the face of lower production.

But the reorganization of consciousness and work relations which seems to be a prerequisite for realizing the economic potential of socialism was only partially and sporadically attempted. Where the regimes said to the workers, 'you work and we'll deliver consumption', they were setting themselves up

for defeat because they accepted the capitalist rules. While they delivered, they **could** win acquiescence despite their other failings but once they could not, they had lost all justification. And if they thought about the long term future at all, it was with the belief that the social changes which motivated the struggle in the first place would **come** about in due time when abundance will have permitted a shorter work day and non-specialized education. Thus the valid idea that the full development of socialist democracy and 'socialist man' requires a material base became the justification for a single-minded pursuit of economic growth and a callous disregard for the self-determination of the people in the present.

Of course, it is no trivial matter to replace the aspirations and ways of **thinking** and feeling of the past with a new way of acting in the world. It does not come about by exhortation or self praise, but only when changed patterns of daily experience at work and out of work make the new ways realistic, even obviously better ways of understanding and acting in the world. Then they can be effectively reinforced by conscious effort in confrontation with the cultural domination by capitalism on a world scale. We will return to the issue of consciousness below.

To the extent that capitalist criteria remained unchallenged, the failure to overtake capitalism in production becomes a major defeat. Capitalism's growing technical division of labour, the multiplication of different **kinds** of products, the tighter hegemony of capitalist aspirations and the failure to sustain the productive potential of socialism has led to a **kind** of giving up. That this has happened independently in a number of countries with very different political histories suggests that it is more than the ideological foibles of poor, **corrupt** or **treacherous** leadership and has systemic causes.

Incompetent, corrupt and treacherous leadership then becomes a symptom as much as a cause of the failure. These leaders were not the old capitalist class surviving the revolution and returning to their old ways. Some were bona fide revolutionary leaders who accepted great risk and sacrifice to organize the oppressed. But there is a way in which capitalism is still the 'natural' system of our time. Just as subsistence agriculture and barter is a 'natural' system where the capitalist system of exchange breaks down, so capitalist exploitation, ideology, beliefs and goals reassert themselves whenever the nascent socialist way of life is weak.

There are many who decided long ago that this first experiment had failed, would deny it the name of socialism, and therefore would deny the relevance of its present crises. But at low magnification and on a world historic scale, the first major point is that a world wide effort to overthrow a world system of plunder and oppression has not succeeded.

There are exceptions, countries such as Cuba where the case for socialism has never been the promise of imminent consumer prosperity but rather of a richer shared collective life for all and where the ties between the people and the leaders are stronger, where democratic participation of a socialist kind

has been tried in innovative ways and where crises have been confronted mostly by revolutionary rather than bourgeois solutions. Further, by third world standards, the Cuban economy is highly efficient. It does not suffer the waste of capital flight, luxury consumption, unused labour and talent. It has allocated top priority in consumption to guaranteeing the basic necessities for all, to social consumption in health and education and cultural life. The macro level efficiency, despite inefficiency at the level of the enterprise, has allowed Cuba to survive the world economic downturn far better than the rest of Latin America. The Cuban experience remains as a hint of the potential of socialism and is therefore the prime target for capitalist attempts to erase the promise of another road.

No criticism of the socialist experience can reconcile us to capitalism. The horrors of capitalism and imperialism remain. The disparity between the rulers and the ruled continues to increase both within and between countries and to take its toll in hunger, premature deaths and thwarted lives. With the decline of revolutionary opposition, the prerogatives of management are being reasserted with increasing cynicism, union busting has become a professional career and long won rights such as health care are being withdrawn as too expensive in our increasingly prosperous economy. A major instrument in this process is competition between workers, both internationally and within each country, sometimes even between locals of the same union.

Modern technology permits the commodity relation to penetrate ever more deeply into every corner of our lives so that kidneys are for sale, wombs are for rent, education is contracted to the highest bidder, the environment is either plundered or conserved according to a cost/benefit analysis, pollution rights can be leased, living things patented, and the personal is the marketable.

Bourgeois democracy itself, one of the truly great achievements of the capitalist revolution, has also become a marketable commodity. As formal democratic procedures become more widespread and voting becomes almost identified with democracy, the means for **trivializing** elections and **nullifying** their significance become more sophisticated. Opinion is manufactured and a technical speciality of electoral tactics and political manipulation stands between people's interests and people's choices while a whole series of buffers are in place to correct the 'errors' that slip through when people do organize and put forth real alternatives.

In the age of monopoly capitalism the corporation rather than the town meeting becomes the model for society and the 'bottom line' of profit becomes the ultimate rationale for ethics. Capitalist democracy brings in the rule of law, but the doctrine of plausible deniability and the craft of damage control institutionalize government illegality. Science and culture become commodities and are evaluated by their sales. Capitalism created modern racism and adapted older patriarchal ways, making sexism a commodity as well as a pillar of social stability.

Whether we date capitalism from the growth of merchant capital in 14th century Europe or the conquest of the Americas in the 16th or the industrial revolution or the seizure of power by the bourgeoisie in the **English** and French revolutions and by the local bourgeoisie in the American revolution, there is much in the historic experience of capitalism that gives it little to boast about. This is clearly seen if we put the Russian and American Revolutions in comparative historical perspective.

Seventy years after the Bolshevik Revolution, we see nationalist rioting in the Soviet Union; 70 years after the American Revolution the massacre of Native Americans was still in full swing and opposition to slavery was still a fringe movement. A hundred years after the revolution, Jim Crow laws were being imposed throughout the South. Seventy years after the Bolshevik Revolution, the formal but hollow structures of socialist democracy are just being revitalized; 70 years after the American Revolution we were still only halfway toward women's suffrage and more than a century from Black enfranchisement. Seventy years after the Bolshevik Revolution, the labour movement struggles for more direct workers' control and strikes threaten to bring down Communist-led governments; seventy years after the American Revolution union organizing was still the criminal offence of 'conspiracy to increase wages'; and now, two centuries later, unions are in decline.

Dating events from the major revolutions toward each social system is not completely fair. There is a sense in which we are one world, and comparisons have to be made also to what has been achieved anywhere. The purpose of relative dating is only to show that nowhere do the proclaimed goals of new societies become realities immediately.

This telescopic view also provides some perspective on the criticisms and rejections of socialism. While some enemies of the revolution had good class reasons for their opposition, and should have been its enemies, most enemies of the revolution should have been its supporters. The bourgeois revolutions in Europe and the United States were accompanied by all sorts of injustices and barbarities. Many people who had initial sympathies with the revolutions were repelled and disillusioned and became enemies of the revolutionary process. Furthermore, a lot of their specific criticisms were valid and infused with a bitter humane passion. With the distance that a century or more can give us, we can now see their criticisms as often more honest, accurate and valid than the rebuttals of those who defended the new social order. But this validity held only in the small and immediate while their abandonment of the revolution in favour of the old regime was reactionary in the larger scheme of things. We need this dual vision to understand these critics, from Dickens to Solzhenitsyn.

Marxist theory has responded to the defeat of the first revolutionary wave in several ways. One approach is to decide that a conceptual framework which was caught by surprise by recent events must be so basically flawed as to be discarded. But without a careful examination of where theory holds up and

where it has been wrong or irrelevant, the call for newness too often neglects what must be continued, and each insight, whether a rediscovery of bourgeois wisdom or an original departure, is proclaimed self consciously to be a new paradigm. Thus we are afflicted with a proliferation of banalities.

A second approach attempts to cut Marxism down to size, to make it a respectable social programme for giving capitalism a human face and discarding the world-historic aims. It could reject even the theoretical possibility of meaningful generalization in favour of petty empiricism or a **post-modern**, post-Marxist, post-enlightenment, post-scientific, post-materialist retreat into those dismal shadows where exploitation is a state of mind or imperialism an unpleasant discourse.

In some cases theory has been trimmed in scope and in militancy to become social democratic econometrics, dogmatic finger pointing or academic soul searching. Marxists have generally been reluctant to take up the challenges of the new social movements except by abandoning Marxism to jump on bandwagons labelled 'neo' or 'post', etc. or to reject them as 'un-Marxist'.

Therefore the islands of flexible principled Marxism both in capitalist and socialist countries take on a special importance for preventing the defeats from becoming a rout, disappointment **becoming** depression or panic. They must be **appreciated** and nurtured.

It is one of the ironies of our history that during the Carter and Reagan years, when political and intellectual life had been shifting to the right, the United States has been emerging as one of the centres of world Marxism.

The particular circumstances of our theoretical enterprise give it its special features. In the absence of a mass unitary movement, the struggles for human advancement have often been carried out separately in movements focusing on anti-racist, feminist, ecological, trade union, solidarity, gay rights, health and social service, educational or other specific concerns. Therefore theoretical work has examined each of these areas separately. At the same time, the relations among them, and especially the relations among class, race and gender analysis had to become a major theme. Meanwhile, our exclusion from power meant that we were free of the incredible demands to resolve immediate urgent issues of providing for the population, issues that dominate the thinking of our comrades in countries where capitalism has been overthrown. This has given us the freedom to explore many long-range issues which Cuban or Nicaraguan or Vietnamese Marxists would place at the bottom of their intellectual agendas. Although excluded from power, we do share a little of the affluence of the American empire and that wealth provides the resources for the meetings, publishing, research and specialized organizations that maintain our efforts.

One consequence of these circumstances is that we more readily see the struggle as one of challenging the capitalist system as a whole, in all the ways it distorts our lives and thwarts our fulfillment. This does not mean that all US Marxists really approach our reality this way. American **anti-**

intellectual pragmatism is too powerful for that. But it is nevertheless true that our conditions of existence place us in an occasion for wisdom.

Our isolation from practical responsibility often gives our work an overly abstract character, naivete about the complexities of the processes of social transformation and the inclination to try to deduce programmes from general principles. Too often US Marxists look at revolutionary societies not from the perspective of comrades in a common venture but as judges grading the revolution according to some grade sheet of their own. Nevertheless, our isolation from power also gives us a scope that is often lacking elsewhere.

Finally, since we do not hold a monopoly in publishing or education or research, our Marxism has developed in intimate confrontation with opposing ideologies. This condition also has contradictory consequences. We are inevitably influenced by the beliefs of those around us, sometimes accepting parts of their agendas and adopting their vocabularies, or resisting this pressure by retreating into fortress dogmatism. But we also have a robust Marxism unlike the flaccid hothouse varieties that have been protected by state power from serious challenge.

Many Marxists are taking a different tack. Instead of **pruning** Marxism, they are **building** on its greatest strength, the dialectical materialist view of the world as a complex, multilevel, contradictory and evolving whole. The call to look at the whole acknowledges that the task is forever incomplete, the whole far too big and strange to be comprehended simply. But it is an appeal always to look further at context, at connections, at process. Marxist holism is a constant reminder of permanent incompleteness, the challenge of revolutionary insight to the gender, class and racially bounded constraints on prevailing ideas.

The Marxist insistence on the historical contingency of what seems self evident, the cry that the real may be irrational, the injunction to doubt and criticize, is always in conflict with the historically bounded real socialist movements. Therefore Marxism regularly produces courageous and brilliant feminists from its ranks, and just as often thwarts and isolates them in the real socialist movements that are still deeply sexist.

The intellectual task of Marxists is to expand the scope of our theory so as to confront capitalism in all its manifestations, laying the groundwork for a political challenge more pervasive than anything yet attempted.

At higher magnification, what had looked like objective tendencies are now seen to be made out of the political choices of movements and the struggles among conflicting ideas as to how to confront the urgent problems of building the new. Now the objective processes are those which arise from the low economic levels, the needs of the various social actors in the revolution, and the power of ways of thought that grew up in the experience of underdevelopment.

One way of looking at the political choices made in the revolutionary process was proposed by Rosa **Luxemburg**: we are trying to build a future

with the instruments of the past, the instruments of the society we are trying to overcome.

There is both a conservative and a radical side to the revolution. On the one hand, it draws on the aspirations which the past sets before everybody but only allows some to reach. The landless peasants who want to own land and hire labour, the enslaved men who want the full freedom to abuse their own women, the latent entrepreneurs among oppressed minorities who want their own opportunities to become exploiters, the individualist intellectuals who want to be free of the marketplace but also of social responsibility, the overworked and alienated workers who want freedom from work, the servants of the **czars** who want palaces for themselves, parents who want their children to receive an education so that they can 'get ahead' out of the working class or peasantry, all bring their own desires to the revolution. Those who want to consolidate the family by giving it economic stability and those who challenge the nuclear family as a way to live, people who want for everyone all the goods that capitalism can offer and those who reject the alienated consciousness of consumerism, those who want to free production from neocolonial constraint and those who want to subordinate economic growth to ecological necessity, nationalists for whom internationalism is only a way to get support for their own liberation and internationalists committed to world revolution all storm the Winter Palaces or go to the mountains together. Conservative and radical dreams live side by side in the revolution and even in the same revolutionaries.

At each crisis point in social development, it is possible to draw on the dreams and methods and resources of the past: an appeal to nationalism, to bourgeois enterprise, to administrative commandism, consumerism, sexism. Or it is possible to leap ahead to **improvise** temporary solutions which prefigure future social relations.

Each has its justifications and dangers. To use the past reinforces that past and may undermine the chance to move ahead. It may gain support, it broadens the movement but also reshapes that movement. It alienates those for whom the revolutionary commitment means a transformed way of life, often regarding them as utopians in a pejorative sense, fearing their innovations as divisive and calling on them not to be so different. Their long range concerns are pushed to a back burner as 'not yet on the agenda of history'. The feminist upsurges that pop up regularly within revolutionary movements are then dismissed as divisive, premature, of lesser importance than production, etc. Much of the creative impulse of the revolution can be dissipated and its advocates alienated.

The point here is not that retreats are unacceptable but that they have to be recognized as retreats and not converted into virtues, changing consciousness in ways that preclude future advances. What may begin as tactical retreats, even necessary corrections of past errors, can easily become the abandonment of socialism.

But to base politics on the future aspirations while neglecting the weight of the past as already obsolete, to leap without a sufficient base of preparation can result in advanced but empty forms and loss of support. Then there is strong pressure to coerce that support, strident and dishonest apologetics, self-praise amid lamentations about the 'backwardness' of the people, distrust of democracy and imposition of a centralized commandism.

Even the most forward **looking** decisions take on a retrograde significance when they are imposed. The net flow of capital from richer to poorer regions of the USSR or among socialist countries is an expression of internationalism and socialist planning aimed at equalizing the levels among the nations. But from the point of view of the nationalisms of richer areas such as the Baltic Republics of the USSR, it feels like exploitation. The fair exchange between richer and poorer regions which was partly instituted by the eastern bloc could then be regarded as subsidies. When advanced forms are imposed without an adequate base of active support, planning becomes a cover for careerism and corruption, discipline protects abuses from criticism, the very awareness of that process leads to cynicism, passivity and alienation.

This is not a necessary result of a leftward turn but of an ineffective one, an attempt to **rush** the future with all the coercive means and excuses of the past that really reinforces that past.

Both kinds of errors have been important in revolutionary history and disastrous to people. But at present the first **kind**, the compromise with the past, is dominant in European and Asian socialism.

In the face of lax labour discipline, it is possible to tighten authority over workers. This usually carries with it more administration, more narrowly defined jobs so that performance can be measured better. But the measures that are devised to evaluate performance are never directly the goal itself but rather some indicator. This means that where supervisors control people's fate and **satisfying** the higher ups becomes a major goal, ways always can be found to produce good measures of performance without the reality of performance. If uniform school exam scores are used to measure teachers' effectiveness, then helping the students to cheat on exams becomes rational individualist behaviour. If a factory's achievement is measured by meeting production targets, this can be done in the easiest way possible. There is a whole literature of humour based on ways of fulfilling someone else's measure of your performance: one Soviet cartoon showed the workers of a nail factory posed out in front with one giant nail balanced on all their shoulders. They grinningly boast 'we have over fulfilled our plan for a thousand tons of nails!' Railways ship barrels of water back and forth between Moscow and Vladivostok to meet their quotas of **ton/miles** of freight. The forestry service plants millions of trees, but there are no forests because the survival of trees was not part of the measure. Then there is more abusive supervision, efforts to invent better indices so that measures and goals will correspond more closely, and

increased alienation making tighter control more necessary in a vicious circle.

The other direction is an expanded autonomy, self organization at the shop level, and '**consagración**', the Cuban term for dedication to work and to social goals. Then a collective can evaluate its own work, and report what it has done to improve the life of the country. But this path **becomes** a sham if not built with care, if the restructuring of work is not accompanied by a restructuring of ideology. In that case, autonomy merely creates organizations for the collective ripping off of society. But a new ideology can only develop when it is reinforced by daily experience at work, at home, at school and at play. It is in the rebuilding of consciousness that sexism as a school for domination emerges as a major brake on socialist development and feminist demands become an urgent necessity for the whole social process.

The greatest failures of most contemporary revolutions have been in the area of building socialist democracy, a self governing society of the associated producers and reproducers. Here again, it is important to reject simple caricatures. Socialist revolutions did bring large masses of people into political life as actors in history. In some cases, advanced political forms were established to allow for grass roots democracy of a **kind** much deeper than that of capitalist politics. The judicial systems with the demystification of the legal process and the development of peoples' and neighbourhood courts is one such area. The system of participation by volunteers in the **working** committees of legislative bodies, extensive nationwide discussion of proposed legislation, the required report back of representatives, the principle of collective leadership are among the formal achievements of socialist states. But forms are not enough, and in many ways these forms eroded and lost real content. How this happened is something that has to be studied very carefully. It is not a simple matter of authorities suppressing discussion and bypassing the legal democratic structures. Democratic participation also requires the self confidence, the time and the information to participate, practice in determination in daily living, encouragement to think independently. It requires the overthrow of deeply rooted attitudes and beliefs, deference to authority, dependence on outstanding leaders, timidities that are built into the socialization of people in class societies. Without these deeper social changes, the democratic forms become empty and a little bit of intimidation goes a long way.

The experience of popular movements that focus on consciousness – the feminist consciousness raising groups, liberation theology's base communities, participatory action research, Freire's *concientizaciab*, Makarenko's work with war orphans in the Ukraine in the 1920's and the theoretical concerns of Gramsci and **Ché** Guevara have provided some valuable lessons that could serve as as a starting point:

'Consciousness' is formed during the daily experience of living and the interpretation of that experience on the basis of previous consciousness. Therefore it cannot be fabricated by exhortation or transformed by offering better arguments.

The feminist slogan 'the personal is political' opened up the areas usually regarded as private to social analysis and criticism, and broadened the notion of consciousness from explicitly held political or social beliefs to include also feelings about the self and others, about how to deal with the world, about what used to be called philosophy of life as against philosophy. It provides a link between the social creation of consciousness in the large, considered by Lukacs, **Gramsci** and Brecht, and the reproduction of consciousness in the context of growing up and within families.

Everybody can learn to lead as well as to follow, but this capacity has to be developed, **nurtured** and encouraged. Without the consciousness raising, collectivity can become a cover for domination by a few and a field for the expression of primitive chauvinisms and eloquent opportunisms.

Consciousness raising and socialist democracy go together, and are jointly a powerful force of socialist development that cannot be put on a back burner for some indefinite communist future. Especially now, when the hollowness of some of the socialist forms has made capitalist liberalism seem attractive, revolutionaries have to avoid talking about democracy in the abstract, without adjectives, or advocating particular democratic forms as if they were equivalent to democracy. The difference between socialist and bourgeois ideas of democracy remain valid: while the one aims at the mobilization of the creative and critical intelligence and knowledge of the whole people on behalf of a common enterprise, the other is organized around the management of dissent within a safe domain and the competition for office. Bourgeois democracy has never yet led to the liberation of the oppressed classes, but has often corrected particular abuses, made the struggle for that liberation less painful and has sometimes ratified victories that occurred elsewhere.

The critique of bourgeois democracy should not be used to dismiss democratic issues from socialist development but to transcend it, incorporating its best features.

National chauvinism was certainly not a socialist invention, and to some extent its survival in socialist countries is not unexpected. But where internationalism is actively promoted and equality institutionalized, where collective decision making makes solidarity a daily experience, ethnic identity would gradually lose its potential for ethnic antagonism. On the other hand where corruption prevails, it very often organizes privilege along ethnic lines. Where 'necessity' becomes the justification for policy which sacrifices all to development and sees national sensibilities as obsolete obstacles to progress, then chauvinism becomes a justification for privilege. Where oppression is

not confronted with materialist analysis chauvinism can come to dominate the resistance to privilege. Each in its own way, the Bulgarian expulsion of Bulgarian Turks, the Rumanian violation of ethnic rights of Hungarians, the anti-Vietnamese chauvinism of the Khmer Rouge and East European anti-semitism are all in part reactionary opportunisms in the face of the problems of socialist transition.

In recent decades the decisions made by most socialist regimes as they coped with problems that had long been denied have been in the backward looking direction, attempting to salvage the present with the resources and beliefs of the past. We cannot declare a general rule that this should never be done, but the over all pattern has been an abandonment of the revolutionary perspective: at best the tactic is swallowing up the strategy. A notable exception has been Cuba, where after a period of ineffective attempts to harness the past to progress, the critique of technocracy, economism and corruption is giving rise to a repoliticization, emphasis on consciousness and collectivity, and renewed interest in the ideas of **Ché** Guevara.

Thus one political conclusion from this analysis is not that revolutionary regimes have rushed too far away from capitalism but that they have not departed enough to realize the full potential of socialism. That is, issues which had been deferred to a distant communist future in fact belong on the agenda now. The most important of these issues involve the transformation of consciousness both to solve the problems of motivation for work and to mobilize the collective intelligence. But we know that consciousness does not change simply by urging it to change or even teaching systematically another world view. It requires altered practice so that daily experience supports the new outlook. This is the context in which socialist democracy and the fight against sexism acquire special importance for social development. And both of these require a restructuring of work, the division of labour, and the evaluation of what constitutes socially important work.

A similar argument applied to the revolutionary movement in capitalist countries leads to a similar conclusion: one weakness of the left has been its failure to challenge capitalism as a whole system, in every corner of our lives. This has allowed the struggles against separate evils to develop separately, often in antagonism to each other, and has not provided the options for us to switch emphases in our tactics as conditions shift.

I propose as a working hypothesis: when liberatory movements come into conflict, it is because they aspire to too little. When Afro-American and women's movements conflict over filling the few affirmative action slots in a university, they are failing to challenge the stinginess and turn off the rest into docility. When the ecology movement faces the ire of the trade unions because industry proves that environmental protection would reduce profits, a challenge is required of the sanctity of profit. Our hypothesis asserts that all struggles for human liberation and well being are complementary in the large. This does not mean abandoning class analysis

or class politics but rather moving from economic to historical materialist analysis.

Nor does it mean a utopian advocacy of a beautiful future divorced from immediate and short term practice. Rather, we have to struggle at different levels. At each level some conditions have to be taken as givens and others as potential variables. The failings of both opportunism and **utopianism** are in limiting the struggle to one level and therefore treating basic variables as givens or all givens as variables.

There are three major possible outcomes to the present situation. The least likely is that *perestroika* and its analogues results in a period of retreat, consolidation and a newly revitalized socialism with a more or less continuous leadership. It is unlikely not because there is a retreat in economic matters. These may or may not be necessary in order to rectify the failings of the past. If they were presented as such and if policy were debated in terms of socialist, revolutionary principles, a revived movement would be able to accept the detour, confront bourgeois alternatives and find a new revolutionary path. But this is unlikely because the economic reorganization is accompanied by massive ideological retreat from rhetorical Marxism to naive liberalism. *Glasnost* has yet to unleash a vigorous creative Marxist challenge to the liberalism and nationalisms which now seem to be its major beneficiaries.

A second possible outcome is that many of the present day socialist countries will rush, stagger or lapse into capitalism with or without the overthrow of their governments. This would open up whole new regions for capitalist expansion, possibly even postponing the next world crisis of capitalism. Having been burned once, their people will not be very receptive to socialist politics and may even play a reactionary role internationally. The recent hostility of part of the Hungarian press to Cuba, and the Polish student movements's enthusiastic reception of a former Batista policeman as a hero foreshadows this possibility. The focus of revolutionary movements would then shift to the present capitalist world.

There is also a third possibility. Although the slogans of the communist-led governments are often repudiated by their peoples as hollow exhortation or unjustified self praise, socialist ideas have penetrated to deeper levels of popular consciousness than has support for the governments. Demands for equal access to goods, against privilege, for workers' control of industry, job security, the right to housing and health care have become internalized even when thought of not as socialist but as elementary human rights. The future of socialism in eastern Europe may well be in the hands of people who are now subjectively anti-communist and whose nationalism or experience with bureaucratic abuses leaves them with considerable naivete about capitalism. This naivete about capitalism shows up in the trauma of **emigrés** from socialist countries upon meeting real live capitalism. Perhaps a third of them return home to eastern Europe, after they discover that America is after all in many

basic ways much like the party propagandists said. One pair of Cuban **emigrés** actually approached the Cuban delegation to the UN demanding that it pay their rent for them because as Cuban citizens they had a right to housing, but who can pay for a New York apartment on New York wages?

The goals of at least part of the dissidents may eventually find expression in a workers' movement which even now has more power than workers' movements under capitalism and which can or has forged alliances with the peasants and intellectuals in textbook Bolshevik fashion. Just compare the political power of Soviet or Polish miners to their West Virginia and Kentucky counterparts.

These are very heterogeneous movements. Their own slogans do not provide a sufficient guide for what their future holds, and we really do not know yet what allies we will **find** there or what kind of societies will emerge when the dust settles.

The retreat of the European revolution creates special problems for the third world revolution. Internationalist support for their struggles will now have to **come** mainly from allies in capitalist countries; the dangers of direct military intervention or prolonged 'low intensity warfare' increase, the enormous tasks of reconstruction in a world of unequal exchange are not to be eased much by the more equitable trade patterns that previously had guided the relations of the Eastern bloc with the third world. This makes solidarity with third world revolutions and the reaffirmation of solidarity even more urgent than before. An irony of history is that American affluence and the stability of US capitalism provides both the resources and the relative freedom that makes us a centre of internationalism.

The task of the revolutionary is to change consciousness. At first impression, this is an awfully tame ambition **compared** to the much-cited 'the task of the revolutionary is to make revolution' of Ernesto **Ché** Guevara. But the first impression is misleading in two ways. It underestimates the complexities of **Ché's** thought on the importance of changing consciousness along with economic and social change, and it mistakenly assumes that changing consciousness is as tame as an academic lecture. The recognition that social changes do not drag consciousness along passively has made the analysis of consciousness formation both under capitalism and in revolutionary societies a major priority for all movements concerned with fundamental change.

On the theoretical level, we first have to expand the scope of Marxist analysis to deal with issues that have had only secondary importance, especially around ecology and feminism. In the past, Marxism has acknowledged its own sources in English political economy, French socialism and German philosophy. But organized Marxist movements have mostly stubbornly resisted accepting that it can learn anything important from any contemporary movements. One way of resisting their ideas is to claim that we had them all along. And indeed we can find the criticism of environmental destruction in Marx and the pioneering feminism of **Engels**

or the militant struggles against the oppression of women in Soviet Asia. We can show that Marxists have indeed participated in feminist and ecological struggles and have important insights to contribute. But that is only part of the story. Revolutionary movements as they exist in reality mostly have been unsympathetic both to feminism and ecology and are the poorer for that. Rather than enter into polemics about who really said what first, the important thing is to take up issues which we have mostly neglected and which the other movements have emphasized, and to recognize that the struggle against capitalism has to become more rather than less pervasive.

A material reason for the Marxist reluctance to deal with feminist and ecological programmes has been that Marxist leaders have mostly been men, with real privileges to lose, and leaders of workers' movements for whom expanding employment was a necessary goal. The subjective side of the reluctance to deal both with feminism and ecology was that they feared that to consider those issues would dilute or even abandon a class analysis. However this is true only for the most economic kind of class analysis. An historical materialist understanding of the present recognizes capitalism as a total system of exploitation which has invented or adapted many kinds of oppression **and** destructive practices and imposed the commodity relation and its spin-offs on all aspects of our lives. The maintenance of capitalism, the reproduction of its physical and human resources, political processes and social relations, beliefs and feelings is a full time task for its rulers, its licensed thinkers and institutions and for all its subjects. Communists have to recognize the pervasiveness of this system and challenge it wherever it produces misery, thwarts human creativity, threatens our existence and debases our world. We should gratefully accept the leadership of the feminists and ecologists who have placed these issues on the political agenda and mapped their intellectual landscape.

Marxists around the new journal *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism* and elsewhere have been developing a framework for this task. Some of the central notions are:

- Human history as a continuation of natural history.
- The interpenetration of organism and environment.
- The active nature of our ecology: 'We are what we do, but above all what we do to change what we are.' (Eduardo Galeano).
- **Society/nature** as a single entity, an eco-historical formation that combines the mode of production and the surrounding nature with which it interpenetrates. But the unity of this whole is not based on harmony or balance but on historical contingency, contradictions and change.
- The recognition of renewable and non-renewable resources as conditions of production that are also consequences of production.
- The unity of production and reproduction. This allows us to examine how the changing allocation of women's labour among these two activities helps to define their situation in society. This allocation has been the basis

for the regulation of sexuality and power within the family. It also acts to determine, the structure of the labour force and the demographic changes which are part of the dynamics of each society, finally feeding back on the allocation of women's labour. This makes the situation of women not an epiphenomenon of social development but a part of the system's dynamics.

– The unity of **production/reproduction** with renewal, consumption and waste as they arise in our evolution first as activities within the body, then externalized and finally socialized. The labour of physical, intellectual, and emotional renewal has too often been dismissed as consumption and part of the private realm of women's work, while consumption has been abstracted from renewal and waste from ecological recycling.

Marxists are participating in the critique of science and technology. We are coping with the dual nature of both, as part of the growth of generic human knowledge of the world and as the socially determined product of a particular society interpreting and using nature according to its own priorities. Science is demystified to be recognized as an episode in the division of labour in which people are selected and institutions established to organize experience for the direct purpose of finding out what the owners of science want to know.

There is a vigorous Marxist health movement which goes beyond the critique of inequitable health service to examine the **social/biological** nature of health and disease. Here some basic insights are:

– Health is capacity to carry out those activities deemed necessary according to each person's class, gender, race, and other specifications. The separation of the deemers from the deemed—about makes the definition of health an object of struggle.

– Human physiology is a socialized physiology. The unity of the physical, psychological and social in a holism that goes beyond the skin of the individual. All people share a common physiological network, but this is embedded in a larger socially created network that is unique to each individual according to **her/his** position in the world. It is in that larger network that the processes of health and disease unfold.

– Infectious disease is the relation between ourselves and parasitic organisms in a permanent co-evolution. Our medical technology and our changing society and environment set the terms for this co-evolution.

I refer to these fields because I have been involved with them and am familiar with the issues. There are other areas in which Marxists have been expanding our challenge of capitalist world views or in which such challenge is necessary.

One such area of priority for us is democracy. Here it is especially important never to discuss democracy without distinguishing socialist from bourgeois democracy or falling into the facile language of pluralism, identifying democracy with multiparty elections etc. The historical experience has been that nowhere has capitalist democracy given real power to the oppressed, but

has often softened that oppression or made struggle against it less painful. While bourgeois democracy emphasizes the organization of dissent, in the socialist context the role of democracy is as the means to mobilize the creative intelligence of the whole people in solving problems and correcting errors. Therefore socialists must assimilate the achievements of bourgeois democracy while inventing its own forms of popular self government.

Another area of priority lies in establishing the theoretical underpinnings for rebuilding of the labour movement after half a century of retreat. This will place the struggle against racism and for local and international solidarity high on the agenda. Can North American and Japanese workers join together **as** effectively as GM and Nissan or Ford and Toyota?

We are living in a difficult time, a low point between periods of upsurge, when revolutionary optimism looks like a cruel joke. Neither the promise of quick victory nor a clear model of what that victory would be like is attracting millions to our cause. Our theories, so powerful in analyzing the large scale historical processes and the structures of capitalism, have been hard pressed to understand the particular, not only to anticipate particular futures but even to explain events satisfactorily after the fact, have been completely incapable of understanding post-revolutionary society, and have sometimes been used to justify barbarities.

Then why continue? First, because capitalism's half **millenium** has shown itself incapable of creating a humane and just world and is increasingly dangerous to us and all of life **as** technologies provide the power, and the commodity relation provides the motivation to turn all aspects of existence into investment for profit. The crises of power in the Eastern bloc cannot hide the deep structural crisis in the apparently triumphant system.

Second, because capitalism is an integrated system in which the correction of particular abuses can be achieved only at the expense of creating new ones.

Third, because it is also an exciting time in which the collapse of old approaches allows for new ways of posing the issues of human liberation in an expanded way.

And finally because understanding the world, breaking out of the Great Brainwash, is an exhilarating first step in reaching toward our own liberation. Immersing ourselves as a whole way of life in the struggle for what **might** be against what **is** provides the greatest degree of freedom possible for us in today's world.

Note: This essay is based on notes for a talk at the New York Marxist School in September 1989 and revised in December 1989 from a presentation at the Marxism Now conference at **Amherst**.