

MARXISM AND ACTUALLY EXISTING SOCIALISM

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I recently visited the Soviet Union. I was there for only one week, as a tourist: time to get only a very limited and superficial impression of life there. Nevertheless, it was a sobering and thought-provoking experience. For even such a brief visit forces one to confront the problems raised by the evidently unideal character of the Soviet Union and other 'actually existing' socialist societies. These are amongst the greatest problems facing socialists in the world today.¹

Marxism, it is often said, is particularly incapable of dealing with these problems in a satisfactory fashion. This is not just because the Soviet Union and other such societies proclaim an allegiance to Marxism. Marxists, after all, have always been the most bitter and persistent critics of these claims. Rather it is because an adequate critical response to these societies is supposed to require a moral perspective; and Marxism, it is argued, is at its weakest in this area.

For Marxism, it is said, is ambivalent – paradoxical or even contradictory – in its approach to moral issues. On the one hand, it claims to be a scientific form of socialism, which rejects any appeal to moral principles or ideals, either in its criticism of capitalism or in its idea of socialism. On the other hand, the work of Marx and subsequent Marxists is full of moral judgements, both implicit and explicit. Indeed, a moral stance is a fundamental and essential aspect of socialism. Marxism, however, has been prevented from articulating or developing its ethical commitments by its claim to be scientific and by its hostility to utopianism. As Lukes puts it, 'Marxism has from its beginnings exhibited [an] . . . approach to moral questions that has disabled it from offering moral resistance to measures taken in its name.' (Lukes 1985: 141)

This has been the starting point for an extensive recent debate among analytical philosophers on the topic of Marxism and morality. The common assumption running through this work is that Marxism does, indeed, involve a moral perspective: the debate has been exclusively concerned with its character. As Geras stresses, in a useful survey of this literature,

the question being addressed is not that of whether Marx did indeed *condemn* capitalism, as opposed to just analysing, describing, explaining its nature and tendencies. All parties to this dispute agree that he did, agree in other words that there is some such normative dimension to his thought . . . The question is the more specific one: does Marx condemn capitalism [and advocate socialism – SS] in the light of any principle of *justice*. (Geras 1985: 47)

Some, like Geras, argue that he does; whereas others, like Lukes (1985), maintain that Marx's work involves a utilitarian type of morality based on a theory of human nature and

¹My thinking on these issues has been greatly stimulated by conversations with Israel and Dvorah Getzler.

self-realization.²

However, I shall not be getting involved in the details of this debate here. Although there is, indeed, a 'normative dimension' to Marx's thought, I will argue that it cannot be understood within the terms adopted by either side in this debate. In doing so, I will criticize the ethical conception of socialism and defend the scientific and anti-utopian approach, both as an account of Marxism, and as a basis for responding to the problems posed by actually existing socialism.

II

Let me begin by acknowledging that the character of actually existing socialism presents very real and difficult problems for Marxism; and that, almost invariably, the response by Marxists to these problems has been inadequate and unsatisfactory. Indeed, what is perhaps most striking is that there has been a virtual silence on these issues, a notable absence of any serious interest in them, on part of most contemporary Marxist writers. When the subject is mentioned at all, what we get is often only a repetition of tired and predictable phrases. Trotsky's (1936) early effort to develop a critical analysis of Soviet society in Marxist terms has degenerated, in the hands of his followers, into the familiar formulas of the Trotskyite sects. Mao's (1977a) attempts to develop a critical understanding of the Soviet and Chinese experience has either been silently discarded or suffered a similar fate. Developments in the USSR and other actually existing socialist societies have virtually ceased to be matters of general concern on the left. Informed attention to these issues is now confined to a small handful of academic specialists. Some of these writers have succeeded in producing valuable works of critical analysis which have impinged upon the wider socialist debate (Bettelheim 1976-8, Sweezy 1980, Nove 1983, Feher *et al.* 1983). For the most part, however, the subject of actually existing socialism is one which most Marxists manage to avoid – often with the easy assurance that such societies are 'not socialist.'

What are the reasons for this silence? According to writers like Lukes and Geras it is the 'scientific' and 'anti-utopian' stance of Marxism which prevents it from engaging critically with the problems of actually existing socialist societies like the Soviet Union. Surely this is the very opposite of the truth. Neither the supporters nor the critics of the Soviet Union adopt a 'scientific' approach to these questions. On the contrary, it is a moral and utopian response which predominates in both camps.

Thus, on the one hand, defence of the Soviet Union all too often lapses into mere idealization and rationalization of that society. This is apparent in much official Soviet Marxism. So far from constituting a scientific analysis of Soviet society, it has been little more than a repetition of state ideology. It has frequently served not to identify and comprehend the problems of soviet life, but to gloss over them. And when they are not simply denied, conflicts and contradictions tend to be attributed to causes and factors external to the socialist system itself: to the influence of 'survivals' from a backward past which have ceased to have any roots in the contemporary social structure, or even to the work of 'enemies' and 'traitors'. Socialism is thus pictured as a harmonious society, from which the sources of social conflict have been eliminated. In short, socialism is regarded as an *ideal*.

²Geras (1985) gives a useful bibliography of this work; and Lukes (1985) contains a useful introductory account of the history of debates on these issues.

The discrepancy between this idealized picture and the realities of Soviet life is of grotesque proportions. This has led to a widespread cynicism about socialism in general, and Marxism in particular, among intellectuals in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe.³ Kolakowski gives expression to this in a savage satirical piece written in 1956 with the title 'What is Socialism?' Kolakowski first gives a long list of things which 'socialism is not'. For example, it is not a society

in which a person who has committed no crimes sits at home waiting for the police, in which there are more spies than nurses . . . in which a person lives better because he does not think at all and which wants all its citizens to have the same opinions in philosophy, foreign policy, economics, literature, and ethics.

At the end of this catalogue, he concludes with the words, 'this is the first point. But now listen attentively, we will tell you what socialism is – well then socialism is a good thing.' (Kolakowski 1956a: 7)

The idea that socialism is 'good thing' equally underlies much of the critical discussion of soviet type societies from a socialist perspective. These societies, we are regularly told, are not 'true' socialism, not 'genuinely' socialist. In this way, too, socialism is regarded as an ideal, as a moral standard against which actually existing forms of socialism can be criticized and condemned, and in terms of which an alternative vision of socialism can be articulated and distinguished from the soviet model.

Such ideas have been extremely widespread on the left during the past thirty years or so. They are quite explicit in the approach advocated by writers like Lukes and Geras, who argue that an ethical and moral conception of socialism is a fundamental and essential aspect of Marxism. Again Kolakowski puts the point in powerful terms. The idea of socialism, he writes, is the idea of

a society which will abolish the exploitation and oppression of man by man. The conviction that such a society is possible is the main treasure which we are able to rescue from the fire of New Jerusalem, the City of the Great King. This is not little despite appearances; it is not a treasure which it is easy to rescue. (Kolakowski 1956b: 8)

One can well understand why such views have been so attractive. They seem to offer a way of criticizing actually existing socialism, while at the same time preserving a commitment to an alternative idea of socialism. This need not necessarily be an explicitly ethical one. A similar approach to actually existing socialism is also to be found among some of the most apparently 'orthodox' and would-be scientific followers of Marx, who would indignantly repudiate any suggestion of utopianism. Thus we are regularly told by these writers that the Soviet Union and other such societies, are 'state capitalist' societies, or 'degenerate workers states', or societies in which capitalism has been 'restored', or whatever. To be sure, various different analyses may be indicated by these phrases; but more usually they are used as mere formulas of abuse, to convey only that these societies are not 'true' workers' states. In other words, they are not as they ought to be according to some particular ideal of socialism.

³I do not know how far this is true in China as well.

However, it would be wrong to give the impression that only the left indulges in this style of thinking. One of the leading figures of the American far right is a writer called Ayn Rand. She propounds, in an extreme and simplistic form, a brand of laissez-faire individualism which has also had some influence on this side of the Atlantic. One of her books is entitled *Capitalism: the Unknown Ideal* (1966). The title faithfully expresses the theme of the book. The ideal of capitalism is the free market. It is 'unknown', she argues, because it has never yet been tried. Capitalism, as it has existed through the centuries – 'actually existing capitalism' so to speak – has never realized this ideal. The free market has always been fettered and restricted by excessive state interference, due to the influence of welfare state liberals, humanitarian do-gooders, and others of that ilk. The evil and negative features of capitalism – the stagnation, unemployment, oppression and misery associated with it – are all the products of the mixed economy. 'True' capitalism, pure free market capitalism, would not be like this.

To look upon history like this is quite clearly absurd. It is to indulge in what Carr has well described as the 'might have been' school of history (Carr 1964: 96). Socialists, however, are often guilty of precisely the same sort of absurdity. During the past 70 years, socialist societies, founded upon Marxist principles, have come to rule over more than one third of the world's population. But none, it transpires, has been following the true path as envisaged by these writers. Socialism – 'true' socialism – remains for them an 'unknown ideal'.

III

I have been arguing that a strong strain of utopianism and moralism runs through a great deal of contemporary Marxist discussion of actually existing socialism. Nevertheless, it is important to see that Marxism, properly understood, involves a quite different approach to such questions. For Marxism claims to be a scientific form of socialism. Its primary aim is to understand the social world and to analyse the laws governing it, rather than to judge it in moral terms or to put forward an ideal conception of how it ought to be. Indeed, according to Marxism, moral outlooks and ideals must be viewed as themselves social and historical phenomena, the products and reflections of specific social conditions. Thus Marx's critique of capitalism is not a mere moral condemnation of it, but rather an attempt to grasp the forces at work within it; and he conceives of socialism, not as a mere ideal, but as the outcome of these forces.

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. (Marx and Engels 1845-6: 56-7)

However, Marxism must not be confused with the 'value-free' or 'ethically neutral' conception of science advocated by positivism (as do Collier 1981 and Nielsen 1987). For, at the same time, Marxism is also a form of *socialism*. As such, it explicitly involves a practical, a moral attitude: it is committed to the abolition of capitalism and the realization of socialism.

Writers like Lukes and Geras can see only paradox and contradiction in all this. They think that the scientific approach must necessarily 'disable' Marxism from acknowledging and developing its commitment to socialism. In fact, however, Marx was not noticeably inhibited from expressing his moral and political ideas by his adherence to the scientific approach. Quite the contrary. His work, and the movement to which it has given rise, has embodied and expressed the most potent and influential moral and political idea of our epoch: the idea of socialism, the idea of a society free from class divisions and class antagonisms, in which oppression, economic

exploitation and social alienation have been eliminated. The scientific approach, so far from 'disabling' or standing in the way of this idea, has been the basis upon which it is thought through and developed in concrete, practical and realistic terms. So far from constituting a problem for Marxism, it has been one of its distinctive features and major achievements. For Marxism provides a theoretical synthesis in which a scientific account of historical development and the idea of socialism are combined together within the unity of a single outlook.

However, such claims must inevitably appear paradoxical and contradictory if the attempt is made to interpret them within the framework of a rigid and exclusive dichotomy between science and morality, facts and values. This is just how Marxism is interpreted by writers like Lukes and Geras. On the one hand, they interpret socialism as an ethical outlook, which criticizes capitalism and advocates socialism on the basis of a set of absolute and universal moral principles. On the other hand, they portray Marx's social and historical account of morality as a form of moral scepticism, as a form of mere relativism which has the effect of 'belittling' or 'rejecting' all values as mere 'ideological illusions' (Geras this volume p.2; Lukes 1985: 3, 4).

Marxism cannot be understood within this framework. In the first place, the historical theory of Marxism does not constitute a mere rejection of morality. Rather, it looks upon morality as a *phenomenon* – as a social and historical phenomenon – and seeks to understand it in these terms. Marxism regards morality as a form of ideology; but that is not to say that it regards morality as pure illusion. For it is a mistake to think of ideology as mere illusion and 'false consciousness'. That is the positivist view of morality. It is expressed by Ayer, for example, who dismisses all ethical statements as 'literally meaningless', as expressions of purely individual, irrational and arbitrary desires and preferences (Ayer 1946: ch.6).

Marx's approach is quite different. He regards different moral outlooks as the products and reflections of specific historical conditions, and the expressions of the needs, desires, interests and aspirations of specific social groups and classes. Furthermore, Marx applies the same analysis to the different varieties of socialist outlook, his own included. This comes out clearly in the account of 'Socialist and Communist Literature' in the *Communist Manifesto* (ch.3), where the various critical reactions to capitalism are related to the class interests that they reflect and express, and communism is portrayed as the most conscious theoretical expression of the developing working class movement.

The theoretical conclusions of the communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented or discovered by this or that would-be universal reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes. (Marx and Engels 1848: 46)

This account is incompatible with the sort of moral outlook which writers like Lukes and Geras wish to impose upon Marx. It is, indeed, sceptical of the idea that morality can be justified by an appeal to universal principles of any sort. For there are no such moral principles. There are no 'transcendent' principles of justice and right, as suggested by Geras (1985: 58, 77); nor is there a universal human 'essence' or nature of the sort upon which Lukes' (1985: 10) account is based. Moral outlooks, and the ideals and values they involve, are historical and relative. Engels puts the point with great clarity.

We . . . reject every attempt to impose on us any moral dogma whatsoever as the eternal,

ultimate and forever immutable ethical law. We maintain on the contrary that all moral theories have been hitherto the product, in the last analysis, of the economic conditions of society obtaining at the time. (Engels 1878: 131-2)

In short, Marxism does not appeal to universal principles or values. For the essential insight of Marxism is that morality is a social and historical phenomenon. Both conceptions of justice and rights, on the one hand, and the character of human nature – whether it is conceived in terms of desires, needs, consciousness, reason or freedom – on the other, are products and reflections of social and historical life. In other words, Marxism does not involve a moral approach to history; but rather a historical approach to morality. The values that Marxism does involve are, therefore, not independent of its historical theory, but founded upon it.

Such views will, no doubt, seem quite unsatisfactory. For they appear to suggest that there are a number of different, equally valid, equally possible, alternative outlooks, each the product of its own specific historical conditions, and that socialism is simply one among these, with no more claim to truth than any other. That is to say, these views seem to imply a simple relativism, which has the effect of undermining any claim to validity for the socialist outlook.

This would, indeed, be the case if history consisted of a purely arbitrary succession of social forms, each merely different from and incommensurable with the others. But history is not like this, according to Marx. Rather, it takes the form of a development through stages and involves progress. Distinct stages succeed one another. Feudal society is followed by capitalism, which in turn gives way to socialism. Each stage arises on the basis of the previous stage, as a higher and more developed historical form. Each is therefore a necessary part of the process, a progressive development, justified for its time and relative to the conditions which it supersedes.

Each stage thus constitutes a merely transitory form, destined ultimately to perish and be replaced by a higher and more developed form. No stage is stable or ultimate. Each actually existing historical form is characterized by conflicts and contradictions. It undergoes change and development; and in the process, the conditions for the emergence of the next stage gradually take shape within it. To the extent to which this occurs, the present conditions cease to be progressive and become, instead, a fetter and a hindrance to the process of development. And they may be judged to be so, not on the basis of eternal or universal moral standards, but from the point of view of the higher stage, the conditions for which have already developed in the present.

The Hegelian origin of these ideas is evident (Sayers 1987). Their specifically moral implications are well summed up by Bradley. 'Morality,' he insists, 'is relative, but is none the less real.' (Bradley 1927: 190)

All morality is and must be 'relative,' because the essence of realization is evolution through stages, and hence existence in some one stage is not final . . . On the other hand, all morality is 'absolute' because in every stage the essence of man *is* realized, however imperfectly: and yet again the distinction of right in itself against relative morality is not banished, because, from the point of view of a higher stage, we can see that lower stages failed to realize the truth completely enough . . . Yet . . . the morality of every stage is justified for that stage; and the demand for a code of right in itself, apart from any stage, is seen to be the asking for an impossibility. (Bradley 1927: 192)

No doubt, there are significant differences between Hegel's account of history and Marx's; nevertheless, a similar progressive view of history underlies them both (Engels 1888: 362). It is in terms of it that Marx views capitalism. He makes no attempt to judge capitalism in an absolute fashion, according to universal principles. On the contrary, his account is thoroughly historical and relative, and all the more realistic and useful as a result. Relative to the feudal society which preceded it, capitalism is a progressive, indeed a revolutionary, social development. It results not only in a very great economic development; it also leads ultimately to moral and political advances in liberty and equality, and not only for the bourgeoisie but also for working people.

To be sure, these developments have usually occurred in an intensely contradictory and destructive fashion. They have involved an enormous toll of misery and degradation. During the course of the development of capitalism, innumerable people were uprooted, their communities and means of livelihood destroyed. They were driven off the land and herded into industrial towns and into slave-like conditions of factory employment (and unemployment).

However, there is another side to these developments, as Marx insists. For in the process working people are liberated from their bondage to the land and to the feudal lord, they are removed from rural isolation, brought together in factories and cities. Their horizons, their social relations and consciousness are extended; and, ultimately, they emerge onto the political stage as the modern industrial working class. According to Engels,

that the situation of the workers has on the whole become materially worse since the introduction of capitalist production on a large scale is doubted only by the bourgeois. But should we therefore look back longingly . . . to rural small-scale industry which produced only servile souls? Only the proletariat created by modern large-scale industry, liberated from inherited fetters including those which chained it to the land, and herded together in the big cities, is in a position to accomplish the great social transformation which will put an end of all class exploitation and all class rule. (Engels 1872: 564)

In this way, as Marx and Engels show, the capitalist system, quite unintentionally and unconsciously, creates the conditions for its own supersession, and even its own 'grave-diggers' (Marx and Engels 1848: 45; cf Engels 1845; Engels 1872). In short, relative to feudal society, capitalism must be judged progressive; but as the possibility of, and conditions for, a higher form of society emerge, it increasingly becomes a fetter to progress. From the standpoint of this higher form it can be judged to be irrational and immoral.

These are familiar themes. They will be well known to anyone who has read Hegel and Marx with any attention, and they are described in many of the commentaries. For example, Kolakowski gives a good account of them in his *Main Currents of Marxism* (1978: Vol.1 ch.13, Vol.2 ch.12, Vol.3 ch.7.3); and even Popper (1966: ch.22) – hardly the most sympathetic or sensitive writer on Hegel and Marx – is aware of the general drift of their thought in this area. But, strangely, there is virtually no discussion of these ideas in Lukes, Geras and most of the other analytical Marxists who have recently written on the topic of Marxism and morality. So intent are they on imposing onto Marxism their own various preferred forms of morality, that they can see only paradox and contradiction in these ideas. But once they are understood the supposed conflicts between Marx's historical theory and his socialism simply dissolve.

This is not to suggest that there are no theoretical problems involved with these views. Of course there are. There are problems, for example, about the nature and criteria of historical progress,

as Popper for one shows (1966: ch.22). These are real and difficult problems, to which there are no simple and clear cut answers either in Marx's work or in the Marxist tradition. I register an explicit recognition of this fact, lest I be accused of ignoring it. However, an exploration of these issues here would take me too far away from my main purpose, which is to describe Marx's idea of socialism.

IV

This arises out of the account of capitalism just described. For Marx regards socialism, just as he does capitalism, in historical and not moral terms. He does not attempt to spell out an ideal vision of how a future society ought to be. Rather, he envisages socialism as the outcome of forces and tendencies at work in present, capitalist society, and he predicts its advent on that basis.

Marx's work is almost entirely focused on the attempt to analyse and understand the capitalist society of his day. As we have seen, his account is essentially historical in character: it involves viewing society in its development. Just as in biology, 'human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape,' (Marx 1857-8: 105) so too in history, the present must be understood in the light of the future. A historical understanding of the present thus necessarily involves certain general expectations about the future.

Beyond this, however, history is no more capable of detailed prediction than evolutionary biology. Marx was well aware of this. His reluctance to try to predict the shape of the future in detail is well known; but this has not prevented the most absurd and extravagant conceptions of the socialist future from being foisted onto him. For example, at the end of his *Main Currents of Marxism*, when hysterical rhetoric has almost entirely taken over, Kolakowski writes,

Marxism is a doctrine of blind confidence that a paradise of universal satisfaction is awaiting us just around the corner. Almost all the prophesies of Marx have already been proved to be false, but this does not disturb the spiritual certainty of the faithful. (Kolakowski 1978: Vol.3 526)

Unfortunately, the idea of an instant utopia 'after the revolution' is all too familiar. But, as Kolakowski knows well enough in less heated moments, this has nothing whatever to do with Marx's views, or with Marxism properly understood.

Marx steadfastly confines his predictions for the future to what he could discern on the basis of the forces and tendencies at work in the society of his time; and that was very little. When Marx was first formulating his ideas in the 1840s, these forces and tendencies were in a very embryonic and undeveloped state. Consequently, in his works of this period, Marx has little to say about the character of communist society. The *Communist Manifesto*, for example, deal with this question only briefly, and in the most abstract and general terms.

If the proletariat during its contest with the bourgeoisie is compelled, by force of circumstances, to organize itself as a class, if, by means of a revolution it makes itself the ruling class, and as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.

In the process, 'the public power will lose its political character,' (Marx and Engels 1848: 54), the state (as Engels later puts it) will 'wither away'.

These ideas remain fundamental to Marx's conception of socialism throughout his life. However, as Lenin so well shows in *State and Revolution*, this conception develops and becomes more specific and detailed in some important respects, on the basis of the increasing experience of the working class movement, most notably during the Paris Commune.

Marx's only extensive discussion of the character of socialist society occurs in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, written after the Commune. In that work Marx retains the ultimate vision of communist society outlined in the *Communist Manifesto*: the idea of a classless and harmonious society. However, he recognizes, far more explicitly and clearly than in his earlier works, that the conditions for such a society cannot be realized immediately after the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. He thus envisages a 'first phase' of communist society; a transitional stage 'between capitalism and communism' which has the political form of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' (Marx 1875: 32-3).

The discussion of socialism in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* is almost entirely devoted to this 'first phase'. And throughout that discussion, Marx's main concern is to emphasize that his conception of it, and hence of socialism, differs from that of the Gotha Programme, in that it is not based upon moral notions of 'fairness', 'equality' or 'freedom' – it does not portray socialism as an ideal society. Marx describes socialism as a society in which working people have seized political power, in which private ownership of the major means of production has been abolished, and in which economic social and political life is planned to meet the needs and interests of the majority. Any actual society of this sort, which emerges out of capitalism, will be limited and imperfect: it will be characterized by 'defects'.

What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but, on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society, which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges. (Marx 1875: 23)

Such a society, as Marx goes on to stress, will continue to involve the division of labour, the state and principles of morality and right (indeed, 'bourgeois right'). It will be a society in which there are conflicts and contradictions. Thus Marx conceives of it as a concrete historical stage beyond capitalism, which will undergo its own process of change, and in which the conditions will develop only gradually for the elimination of class differences and the passage towards a 'higher phase' of full communism.

V

These are the main features of Marx's account of socialism. When Marx initially formulated these ideas, the tendencies in capitalism that he describes were still in an undeveloped state. The *Communist Manifesto* opens with the bold declaration, 'a spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism.' At the time, however, these words were as much an expression of theoretical conviction and hope as a description of the historical situation then prevailing. The Communist League, for which the *Manifesto* was written, consisted of a mere handful of activists with little wider following. Hardly had the *Manifesto* appeared than the revolutions of 1848 were defeated. The Communist League, and other such revolutionary groups, were dispersed and their members

(including Marx) driven into exile. The 'spectre' of communism had, to all appearances, been extinguished and the bold vision of the *Manifesto* refuted.

After a decade of quiescence, however, the revolutionary socialist movement began to emerge again and organize itself anew. It rapidly developed and grew to become, by the end of Marx's lifetime, a presence throughout Europe. The 'spectre' had returned. In the century and more since then it has spread out to haunt quite literally the whole world. Approximately one third of the world's people now live under communist governments, and Marxism is a significant political force almost everywhere else. As a philosophy and as a political movement, Marxism has had an impact and an influence to a degree that has no historical precedent, and in comparison with which competing political philosophies, and even the world's great religions, must be judged to be merely local and regional phenomena.

Of course, there are a number of important respects in which Marx's expectations have not been fulfilled. Marx envisaged that socialism would come first in the most advanced industrial societies of Europe, and it has not done so. Arguably, however, Marxism is capable of comprehending this fact. In any case, this is a matter of detail, even if an important one; and it seems difficult to resist the conclusion that, in its broad and general outlines, Marx's account of the historical tendencies of capitalism has been remarkably confirmed by historical events.

When it comes to Marx's account of socialism, however, the issue is more difficult. For actually existing socialist societies, according to writer like Lukes and Geras, have nothing in common with the sort of socialism which Marx envisaged or for which the founders of these societies struggled and fought. These societies constitute moral 'failures', 'disasters' (Lukes 1985: 140, xi), 'crimes and tragedies which disgrace socialism' (Geras 1985: 85) and which refute Marx's predictions.

It is clearly true that the development of actually existing socialism has contradicted Marx's expectations in some major respects. It is in no way surprising that this should be so. Marx's picture of socialism, as we have seen is only an outline, in the most general terms, of what could be foreseen on the basis of the limited revolutionary experience available to him. Now we can draw upon the experience of 70 years of the Soviet Union, almost 40 years of China, as well as on the experience of numerous other socialist societies.

Marx's account of socialism certainly needs to be criticized, modified, revised and developed in the light of this experience. It is tempting and easy to follow writers like Lukes and Geras, and condemn these societies as 'not socialist'. But this is neither a realistic nor a tenable response for Marxists. After all, these societies are the product and the outcome of the contradictions of capitalism described by Marx, and of the socialist movement generated by them. In them, the main structural features of socialism are realized. Problematic and difficult as it may be, therefore, Marxists cannot simply disown these societies. To do so, as Markus rightly says, is a form of 'escapism':

escapism from the fact that these societies, however tragic this may be, do belong to the international history of that social and intellectual movement which bears the name of socialism . . . The lessons that may be learned from them integrally and necessarily belong to contemporary socialism. (Feher *et al.* 1983: 43)

Moreover, these lessons are not entirely and completely negative. It is simplistic to regard events

as large and momentous as the Russian revolution and the development of socialism in Russia as mere 'crimes' and 'disasters'. Such terms are quite out of place in a serious historical account – they positively stand in the way of an attempt to engage critically with the problems of actually existing socialism.

In saying this, I must stress, I am not seeking to deny – still less to excuse or condone – the terrible human cost of these events. There is no doubt about the enormous sacrifice of life, the suffering, the brutality and oppression, which they have involved, particularly under Stalin. Nevertheless, there is another side to them which must also be acknowledged. For at the same time the Russian Revolution was an epoch-making achievement, a major turning point not only in Russian but also in world history. As a result of it, Russia emerged out of the chaos and disintegration of Czarism, and developed from a state of semi-feudal backwardness – even through a devastating war – into a great industrial nation and world power. In the process, moreover, the health, education, welfare and material well-being of the Russian people have all improved greatly.⁴

These are irrevocable and irreversible developments. It is entirely idle to speculate about what might have happened, or what ought to have happened in their place. Rather, they must be accepted as fact. Problematic as it may be, we must reconcile ourselves to the view that 'actually existing' socialism *is* socialism. We must give up the attempt to repudiate and disown it; and, instead, begin to try to analyse and understand it, and learn some of the lessons it can teach.⁵

VI

These lessons are of great importance for Marxists everywhere. For it is undeniable that socialism as it has actually developed is not entirely as Marx envisaged it. If Marxists are to learn anything from this, they must respond in a way which is quite the reverse of the moral approach I have been criticizing. Instead of hanging on to an ideal picture of socialism and using it as a standard by which to criticize historical reality, they must accept reality, and use the general method and theoretical framework of Marxism to understand the course that it has actually taken. Inevitably, in the process, it will be necessary to rethink and revise Marx's specific account of socialist society in some quite fundamental respects.

What is primarily in question here is Marx's picture of the 'first phase' of socialism – socialism 'as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society' (Marx 1875: 24) – for even the most optimistic defenders of the Soviet Union have not quite gone to the

⁴In China, too, the revolutionary struggle and the advent of socialism rescued the country from over 100 years of chaos, disintegration and civil war. Despite the suffering and bloodshed that have been involved, socialism has enable China to 'stand up' (Mao 1977a) as a great and independent nation, and develop economically and socially.

⁵This is not to suggest that the USSR is the *only* possible model of socialism, or that future socialist societies will have to take the same form or follow the same course of development. Indeed, the examples of Yugoslavia and China show that this is not the case; and there is every reason to believe that if socialism comes in the very different conditions of an advanced industrial society like Britain it would be even more different. A major reason for attending to the lessons of the experience of actually existing socialism is to avoid repeating it.

length of claiming that it is yet a 'fully communist' society. As we have seen, Marx conceived of this first phase of socialism as a transitional stage. Although he did not speculate about the length of this transition, it is clear that he imagined that it would be relatively brief. For he thought that the abolition of private ownership of the means of production would both create the conditions for rapid economic development, and at the same time eliminate the material basis of class divisions and class antagonisms, and hence also of the state. These could be expected to 'wither away' automatically as the productive forces develop, abolishing scarcity, and as class attitudes, embodied in social arrangements and habits inherited from the past – deprived of their material basis – lose their hold.

From the time of Lenin until very recently, these assumptions have provided the almost unquestioned foundations for orthodox Marxist thinking about socialist society. Thus Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, has considerable problems in characterizing the nature of the state in socialist society. He describes it as a 'transitional state', as a state which 'is no longer a state in the proper sense of the word,⁶ since it will be in the process of withering away from the very moment of its creation (Lenin 1917: 328, cf 310).

These assumptions have continued to dominate Soviet thought. In 1936, Stalin announced that 'the exploitation of man by man has been abolished' in the Soviet Union, and with it 'the elimination of all exploiting classes' (Stalin 1936: 799-800).⁷ Nevertheless, Stalin continued to maintain that the Soviet state had the form of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. In 1961, however, Khrushchev took matters further when he declared that the Soviet state was becoming a 'state of the whole people' and that the Soviet Union was embarking on the stage of 'full scale construction of communism.' (Unger 1981: 173-4) In the Brezhnev years, a more cautious note was sounded. The USSR came to be designated as a 'developed' or 'mature' socialist society – 'a relatively long stage in the development from capitalism to communism' (Brezhnev quoted in Unger 1981: 286-9) – conveniently vague phrases which suggest only that the USSR is somewhere along this line.

The actual character of the USSR and other socialist societies, however, has been in stark contradiction to these optimistic pronouncements. All have extremely powerful and extensive state apparatuses, which show no signs of withering away. It has become increasingly evident that the 'first phase' of socialism is destined to constitute a relatively enduring historical stage, perhaps even a whole historical epoch on a par with capitalism.⁸

I must make it clear that I am not here endorsing the Orwellian view that 'actually existing' socialism is a monolithic form of totalitarianism: a rigid and static society from which all opposition and dissent have been eliminated and obliterated. That picture is, as it were, merely

⁶The phrase is taken from Engels. In his discussion of the continuing operation of the principle of 'bourgeois right', Lenin goes further and says that there is a continuing need for 'the bourgeois state without the bourgeoisie' (Lenin 1917: 335).

⁷According to Stalin's analysis (1936: 822-3), the USSR was composed of two classes – workers and peasants – together with the 'stratum' of the intelligentsia. This analysis is still officially accepted.

⁸Mao is reported to have made this suggestion, I believe.

the reverse – the negative, nightmare version – of the official view that Soviet society is a harmonious 'state of the whole people'. And it is equally false. For it is quite evident that Soviet social, economic and political life is marked by a variety of conflicts and contradictions. It is absurd to deny this: the need, rather, is to acknowledge these contradictions and to try to understand their character.

This has far reaching implications for the Marxist approach to these societies. For it indicates the need to analyse the social, political and economic forms of this stage, and their characteristic tensions and conflicts, in their own terms. The assumption that the first phase of socialism will be only a brief transitional period has consistently stood in the way of any attention to these issues. Among the early Bolsheviks, as Unger says, it led to 'a profound ideological prejudice against state and law – not just against the state and law of 'bourgeois' society, but against state and law as institutions of any society, including socialist society.' (Unger 1981: 4; e.g. Pashukanis 1924) These attitudes must be questioned.

The moral approach is no help in this; but Marxism, I am arguing, can provide a powerful framework of analysis, even if some of the assumptions which have traditionally governed its approach to socialism need to be questioned. For there is no good reason to believe that the basic theoretical terms of Marxism cannot be used to analyse the problems of socialist societies. On the contrary, these problems seem, in many ways, to lend themselves quite readily to such analysis.

Thus it is increasingly evident that the conflicts of socialist society cannot be regarded merely as survivals of attitudes and habits from the past. For their enduring character strongly suggests that a basis for them remains, even in the absence of private ownership. The divisions and tensions in Soviet society bear sufficient similarities to those of capitalist society to at least raise the question of whether they should be analysed in similar terms, as class divisions.⁹ Moreover, the serious problems of stagnation and inefficiency which have come to afflict the Soviet and other socialist economies, indicate that conflicts between certain aspects of the relations of production and the development of the productive forces continue to exist.

There is also a political dimension to these issues. For if these differences and contradictions are not mere relics from the past, but have roots in the present social and economic structure of socialist society, then not all opposition and dissent represents hostility to socialism as such. In Mao's words, not all contradictions are between 'the people and its enemies'. The presence of critical forces in these societies – just as in capitalist societies – reflects the existence of different interests, needs and aspirations within them. There are 'contradictions among the people'; and satisfactory political forms for their 'handling' and resolution must be evolved (Mao 1957). But where these contradictions are leading – whether they can be handled successfully through reform or whether new revolutionary changes will ultimately be necessary – is beyond either my present scope or, indeed, competence to say.

With Gorbachev, the Soviet authorities have at last begun to acknowledge many of these issues and problems with a frankness that would have seemed quite inconceivable even a few years ago. They have abandoned the pretence that the USSR is a harmonious society, on a steady and

⁹This is a complex issue: see Feher *et al* 1983: ch.1 and Nove 1979: ch.13. I am now better aware of the difficulties than in Sayers 1980.

automatic path to the full communist utopia.¹⁰ This is very welcome. In the past, criticism of actually existing socialism has been virtually the monopoly of the moralists. However, critical analysis of these societies, I have been arguing, does not require a moral basis. It does not require a rejection of Marxism. On the contrary, the historical and scientific approach of Marxism is capable of providing a far more powerful and satisfactory theoretical framework for the analysis and understanding of the issues of actually existing socialism. And if the attempt to think through these problems in Marxist terms involves a questioning of some time-honoured Marxist assumptions, at the same time it may perhaps result in a renewed critical development of Marxist theory.

¹⁰I am not aware of Soviet work which has yet attempted to think through these issues in Marxist terms at a theoretical level though, no doubt, it exists, or soon will.

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