What relevance does Marx have in 1983? The social and cultural changes that have occurred since Marx's death and particularly in the accelerating pace of modern industrial society cry out for a philosophy of struggle and change that is based on the real concrete conditions of 1983. Such a philosophy must analyse and integrate new forms of struggle and provides the basis for new strategies to bring about social, political and economic change. Socialists can't afford to rely on defensive dogmatism when we're confronted by radically altered circumstances and conditions. Rather new ideas and creative analysis should be an integral part of the socialist movement.

It is essential that socialist thought be characterised by a sense of flexibility and responsiveness which is essential if our ideas are to remain relevant to the society and an increasing number of people.

Marx was the founder of the modern socialist movement, a great revolutionary of exceptional intellect whose work remains a resource of outstanding value. But he was not a god. A materialist, he would not have wanted his writings turned into scripture. An anti-dogmatist, he did not try to force new data and new realities into old formulas and, in the last decade or so of his life, radically altered some previous standpoints, including those contained in Capital.

Of course, there was the long period of stalinist orthodoxy which had its origins in the establishment by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and within the party itself by Stalin himself, of an ideological and theoretical monopoly which was a key part of the apparatus of bureaucratic control. But how could many of Marx's present day followers who reject this approach still tend towards deification? With unintended irony, Marx may have given part of the answer in his own summation of religion: Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

— (Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, FLPH, Moscow, p. 42.)

Thus, the difficulties of the socialist movement in the last half of the 20th Century seem to have led some marxists to conceive of Marx's theories as a total explanation of capitalist society's workings and the prescription for its processes of change, to treat one or another version of these theories as a kind of security blanket, contact with whose comforting surface is essential to their mental equilibrium.

Another part of such a miscasting of socialist theory is the continuing influence of the conceptions of science prevailing in Marx's day. These held that fundamental laws existed, acting somewhat in the manner of the mainspring of a clock as the underlying cause of all the following phenomena, however complex the intervening mechanisms.

Knowledge was to be gained by cutting things up, understanding the parts, then the whole by reassembling them. The prevailing "evolutionism" also entailed a belief in inevitable progress and pre-determined stages of development.

But living systems may not readily be approached in these ways, nor is any pattern of development in them so certain. A rain forest, for example, must not only be studied in its separate aspects of soil, climate, the various species present, etc., of which one is ultimately extracted as the main determinant. It must also be studied as a whole, as such.

If this is so with the ecology, how much more is it likely to be the case in society, which involves consciousness and the social dimension as well as the biological? Apart from these considerations, in practice events in the postwar period have produced enough surprises to chasten anyone with pretensions to possessing "the key to history".

Marxists, in fact, have not been significantly more successful than others in predicting the actual course of economic development, however many brilliant analyses have been made after the fact.
Forecasts of what actual social/political consciousness would emerge from a particular economic period, or period of history in general, have been even less impressive. In many cases, Marxists have had to learn more from others — for example, from feminists and conservationists — than they have been able to teach (which is not to say that all of them have learned).

Since politics operates largely in the realm of social consciousness, there is nothing worse than basing one’s political strategy and activity on what ought to be according to some theoretical prescription, instead of what that social consciousness actually is.

It is to advance, not retreat, to reject a conception of Marxist theory which has time and again put us in that position. It will help solve one of socialism’s main problems — bringing its theory and ideology closer to what people actually encounter in their political experience.

But if we give up the view that Marxism does, or should, or will (if reinterpreted yet again) provide us with a unitary theory, a total explanation, a formula for prediction — will that not stop us from “getting it all together in our heads” and leave us all at sea?

Not if we reject that expectation, and use our theoretical resources to help us “listen” more to practice instead of thinking that theory somehow can dictate to reality how it must behave.

To what social facts, then, has modern theory to particularly relate?

Engels said:

Modern socialism is, in its essence, the direct product of the recognition, on the one hand, of the class antagonisms existing in the society of today between proprietors and non-proprietors, between capitalists and wage-workers; on the other hand of the anarchy existing in production.

— (Anti-Duhring, first sentence)

That is, the movement for socialism was the response, the solution to those problems which were tearing at people at that time.

It still is. Exploitation, inequality, lack of social justice and the antagonisms they generate abound, and socialism must hold out the promise of changes which will really tackle these problems and not merely, for example, replace old forms of inequality and privilege with new ones.

The anarchy existing in production which results from private owners (now, particularly multinationals) deciding things according to their own profit/growth interests is even more destructive than before, producing economic crises, pursuit of technological development and growth in the GNP irrespective of effects on the ecology, on jobs, or the satisfaction of the reasonable, sustainable material needs of the global population and the setting, without social consideration, of priorities which no longer meet the felt needs of contemporary generations.

But these are not the only problems that socialism has now to recognise and solve.

We could — should — say also that modern socialism is the recognition of:

* The hierarchy of authority and bureaucracy which deprives people of control over their own lives, and of the inadequacy and restrictedness of present forms of democracy.

* The dangerously disturbed relationship between humanity and the rest of nature (ecology, resources, uranium, etc.).

* The subordination of women, which permeates and puts its stamp on the whole character of social, family and personal as well as economic life.

* Racial and national oppression — in Australia, first and foremost of the Aboriginal people — and in the world of the poor and weak nations by the rich and strong.

* The undermining of independence, self-determination and all-round economic development (of even quite strong as well as small and underdeveloped nations) by the great multinational corporations, hampering, also, the development of the internationalism needed to tackle current problems which are increasingly global.

* The threat of unimaginably destructive nuclear war.

Socialism today, to be effective, must be the recognition of these problems (the list of course does not pretend to be complete), and show that it is the solution to them.

It would be naive, in the light of the experiences of socialism internationally up to the present, and practically ineffectual, to hold that all the rest must be subordinated to the first two stated by Engels (it won’t happen) and/or to hold that once those are solved, solutions of all the rest will be caused to follow (that won’t happen either).
Aboriginal Land Rights Protest during Brisbane Commonwealth Games. October 1982

The above are not merely separate planks nailed together to make a platform. They are organically interconnected laterally as well as vertically, if one can put it in that way, though not an ordered hierarchy.

For example, the struggle against the threat of nuclear war is (may be) also a struggle for national independence (Australian bases; US domination of Europe, etc.). It has links with the struggle to extend democracy so that people have more say in foreign policy. It intimately enmeshes with the demand that social needs come before profits. It is an internationalist movement. And how would the ecology survive a nuclear holocaust or even a future based on nuclear power? Etcetera.

The struggle for women's liberation is a particularly urgent expression of the need for people to have control over their own bodies and lives. It is linked with putting social needs before profits, and to the actual social priorities to be established when that general principle is realised. The practice of this movement has vital connections with concrete ways of establishing non-hierarchical organisational forms and overcoming a fixed division of labor.

The struggle to protect the ecology embraces a view of the responsibility of present generations to future ones (a particular case of giving priority to social needs); of the concrete meaning that should be given to “material abundance”; of the kind of development which should be allowed or disallowed and of its relationship to jobs. And less tangible, but profoundly important, the influence on humanity's self-understanding of accepting itself as a part of the rest of nature.

So one could go on, but that may suffice to illustrate the point.

It is, of course, true that the majority of people engaged in one or other of those concerns — from the organised labor movement to the conservationists — do not yet generally see these connections, and that there may be conflicting currents within and between the various movements.

But the connections exist (they are not an invention of the socialists).

The role of socialists is not to seek to establish their own movements separate from the ones spontaneously generated by modern life. It is rather to forge their own total vision and use it to promote the understanding of others, and to use their organisational skills to bring them practically closer together.

But the “total vision” of socialists in the sense used here is under-developed. This is a major reason why the socialist movement in Australia is still small and itself lacks cohesion. It does not present itself to the people sufficiently as the confident and assertive bearer of new, regenerative social philosophy (a "new commonsense" to use Gramsci’s term).

Yet every successful movement in history for radical social change, whatever the form of its pronouncements (religious, theoretical, directly political) has had as its basis of appeal to the mass of people, a social philosophy to which they responded, one which represented recognition of real problems capable of some degree or other of actual solution in the conditions prevailing, and which they came to regard as their own.

As the worker-soldier follower of the Bolsheviks said just after the revolution, in answer to a hostile group:

".... what (Lenin) says is what I want to hear, and all simple men like me." (quoted by John Reed in Ten Days That Shook the World, Chapter 7.)

Among the most important realities socialists in Australia face is the fact that the struggle for socialism here is a long term task.

This is not so evident, except for those capable of monumental self-deception, that it may seem trite even to state it. But simple acceptance of a fact we can't get around is not enough. The crucial questions are: how are we, in this long haul, to:

* maintain an individual and collective confidence and belief in what we are doing? — maintain morale, commitment, cohesion?
* make our activity now really meaningful in relation to our objective, not just a carrying-on-in-hope operation?
* possess and project the combative and assertive spirit required by the seriousness of the crises of our society and necessary to attract new adherents?

Autumn 1983

Peter Murphy
Almost everybody poses these questions in one way or another, though some do so only to themselves, perhaps fearing that their loyalty might be queried if they did so openly.

Others admit to the existence of these difficulties, but nurture for their own sustenance the belief that one day it will all change very quickly, in this sense living mostly in an imagined future.

Things certainly may change quickly, as history shows. And today there is more "inflammable material" in world politics, as Lenin once put it, than ever before. More and greater dangers loom.

But we cannot build soundly on the basis of events which we cannot predict and whose nature we cannot know. Nor should we assume that upheavals will all necessarily be in our favor (dangers of a resurgent fascist-type right exist in a number of countries). Still less can we assume that upsurges will necessarily be "the eve of the revolution" à la Storming of the Bastille in 1789 or of the Winter Palace in 1917, which many have taken as being typical of revolutionary processes.

I don't think any sober historical examination sustains such a view. In Spain, Italy, Germany, for example, and on other continents, there were upheavals and violence aplenty, but no sudden transformation from feudalism to capitalism.

The struggle for socialism in countries like Australia may well be protracted in that sense as well as in the length of time taken.

But if we accept this, we still have to deal with the very real problems posed above concerning cohesion, maintenance of morale and relating our activity now to our objective.

First, and most important, as already stated, is for socialists to develop a coherent, offensively oriented social philosophy as already indicated.

Second, is to adopt an "interventionist" strategy to bring the socialist objective and daily practice closer together.

This means more than just intervening and fighting on the issues of the day. All except those avowing ivory tower or ghetto politics accept this.

It is rather intervening in the belief that intervention can, and with intention that it should, to one degree or another change both thinking and power relations in society.

It means expanding, without setting preconceived limits, the range of issues considered of proper socialist concern— including issues which have been traditionally excluded as impossible to influence, too laden with "absorptionist" poison, or of proper concern only "after the revolution".

Investment policies, what can be demolished or built and where, what trains should run, what industries should exist, the social wage, measures furthering liberation, are just some of the issues that spring to mind.

Intervention strategy embraces the view that more is possible than simply hoping that socialist consciousness will somehow develop from the experience of fighting for reforms which are in themselves of little other consequence.

It is the view that intervention can enhance the actual power of the working class or sections of it (or other strata) and reduce that of the capitalist class, in structural/institutional as well as ideological terms.

Similarly, women can change some actual power relations with men, conservationists can actually push back some destructive assaults on the ecology, etc.

In other words, without taking it too far, and while pointing out as the CPA Program does that this cannot be transformed into belief in a general "gradualism", intervention means to a certain extent creating essential elements of the new society "within the shell of the old". It is the view that the new is not all in the future.

Socialists generally acknowledged that elements of capitalism grew within feudalism. But many rejected that possibility in regard to socialism and capitalism, on the grounds that these societies were too different, whereas feudalism and capitalism both feature rule by minorities and exploitation of the majority.

But interventionist strategy also bears on this point, involving the very definition of our objective.

We now speak of self-management socialism, not simply of socialism. This "socialism without an adjective" traditionally meant (some references to mass involvement notwithstanding) that "the government"—now a "workers" one—takes over the direction of society. Direction which, under capitalism, is performed by capitalists organising production, and by governments which both "do the capitalists' will" and also restrict or supplement them, and the market, in the interests of the system as a whole. And in backward, semi-feudal societies replace the feudal and mandarin-type classes which ensure some sort of social cohesion in a sea of petty and often locally self-sufficient production.

The limitations and often positively repellent aspects of this "government" or state socialism, with the ruling communist party forming its unshiftable core whatever its faults or degree of corruption and whatever the desires of the people, are now abundantly clear.
Certainly, if that is what we offer as our “vision” socialism will not be just a longterm objective but, for countries like ours, an ever unattainable one.

Socialism took this narrow conception of its aims, and this bureaucratic, government form not only because of economic underdevelopment in the countries where capitalism was overthrown. Or are we to believe that bureaucratic dangers or the subordination of women automatically and progressively diminish in high technology societies? I don’t know where. Possibilities of pushing back bureaucracy and old conceptions certainly expand in these conditions. But so do various means of preserving and strengthening them.

Socialism took this form also because of the lack of ideological development of the working class. And a big working class can be ideologically underdeveloped as well as a small one. I would say ours in Australia is.

It took this form also because of certain theoretical conceptions held by revolutionaries, particularly concerning the directness, rapidity and degree of determination of consciousness by economic relations of production.

Having taken over necessary social functions which the working class at the time was unable or not permitted to perform, the government-CP set-up became consolidated into a system by the new self-interest involved in preserving such control.

So interventionist strategy is not only a recognition of certain necessities and possibilities of our situation in this period of the struggle against capitalism. It is also an essential virtue in assisting the working class to develop, within capitalism, the capacity to “self-manage” the new society, and to establish other new social relations.

But who, or what, is this “working class”? Arguments over its definition go back a long way and tend to recur. For example, the argument that the “point of production” is not only important (with which nearly everyone agrees) but is the ultimate determinant, frequently with the corollary that the struggle within the factory or industry over the division of the product between workers and bosses is the class issue.
Thus, although the “working-class-in-itself” forms the great majority of the population, there are in ideological and political terms many “working classes” separated by different histories, interests and perceptions. These exist objectively as well as being heightened by the self-interested efforts of the capitalist class and its ideologues, and the state.

Use of rhetoric about “the working class”, “class issues” and “class struggle” in these circumstances may therefore be even more empty and misleading than usual. Among other things, it ignores the way in which issues such as the Gordon-below-Franklin dam, or those concerning women’s liberation, cut across conventional or traditional class lines.

We have opted for a wide definition of class, as witness our program. We have defined it thus for a number of theoretical reasons, including Marx’s view (set forth in the Grundrisse) that with the increasing entry of science into production, and all that involves regarding education and other non-point-of-production social activities, direct labor time would lose its pre-eminence in the determination of value. We have also opted for this wide definition so that we should know in practice to whom to address ourselves. Whom we are trying to motivate, to influence, to win.

But, however defined, we do not regard the working class as being, just by existing, a dynamic or political, especially socialist, entity. The real issue is the development of its consciousness and activity to remake society and to remake itself in the process.

To use the rather graphic words of Marx, to define it is to recognise it only as “a class in itself”. Only to the extent that the dynamic, ideological, political dimension is present does it become “a class for itself”. That is, to the extent that it takes the road of struggling for a new society in which it shall manage — and in which therefore no permanent, separate stratum of managers will exist — and in which will be incorporated other, new social relations.

To a crucial extent, this needs to take place within capitalism. Otherwise, though there may be at some stage a different society arising from a conjuncture of circumstances, it will not be self-management socialism. It will not be a society where women and other oppressed groups are liberated in terms which they themselves identify as meeting their needs. It will not be a society in which humanity restores some sort of harmony to a dangerously disturbed relationship with the rest of nature. And so on.

How far the Australian working class is from being yet “a class for itself” is manifested not only by the strength of conservative and non-socialist thinking within it, but also by the degree of its segmentation and internal divisions.

New issues have also been raised by the very expansion of the working class. In Russia in 1917 the working class was less than 20 percent of the population, and though segmented internally to one degree or another, it had a manifest identity distinguishing it from the other classes and strata of Russian society — for example, from the peasants and civil servants.

In Australia, on the other hand, and other economically developed societies, the working class is 80 percent or more of the population. So, while it is manifestly differentiated from farmers, small business and professional people etc. the political, cultural and social division within it are no less notable in the political life of the country.

Thus, although the “working-class-in-itself” forms the great majority of the population, there are in ideological and political terms many “working classes” separated by different histories, interests and perceptions. These exist objectively as well as being heightened by the self-interested efforts of the capitalist class and its ideologues, and the state.

Use of rhetoric about “the working class”, “class issues” and “class struggle” in these circumstances may therefore be even more empty and misleading than usual. Among other things, it ignores the way in which issues such as the Gordon-below-Franklin dam, or those concerning women’s liberation, cut across conventional or traditional class lines.
Far from being exceptional or likely to go away, even in present conditions when economic crisis tends to focus attention in one direction, such problems and conflicts are likely to be typical of many struggles in which socialists will be involved from here on.

This is why the CPA Program speaks at such length of the necessity of building coalitions and alliance for socialism.

Traditionally, coalitions and alliances have been terms referring mainly to relations between the political representatives of different classes. For example, between those of the working class and middle class or peasantry, urban and rural capitalists, etc.

This element still remains, and many modern movements stretch over a number of strata and classes. But most importantly, the coalitions and alliances we are trying to build are largely between different segments of the working class. Different sections differently motivated, as stated earlier, because of their different histories, situations and perceptions, all now under impulsion from the various acute contradictions of modern society.

The coalitions and alliances of which we speak are thus both of social forces, especially including different sections of the working class, and of issues.

The third thing is for socialists to reconsider, and be more open-minded about their own relations among themselves and with others, especially with socialists in the Labor Party and those with no particular party or group allegiance.

As well as recognising the need to increase strength by coming closer together, involved also is recognition of the fact that politics and the way people relate to politics and political parties is changing.

It is noticeable, for example, that many are more critical and mobile in their political allegiances, or even consider themselves to be "outside" politics. This latter feeling could increase dramatically if the powers that be, unable to reverse the growth of a permanent army of unemployed (both those recognised and unrecognised in statistics), succeeds in more or less permanently "marginalising" them - pushing them permanently out of the mainstream of society.

It is not immediately apparent how this might be tackled, though I believe that for socialists to see themselves and act as the bearers of a new social philosophy, to become more a moral force is a large part of the answer.

How to bring about a regroupment of the avowed socialists who are in one way or another directly "in" politics is also important. Our confidence that they will is not misplaced.

REFERENCES

1. Recent research has thrown new light on the last decade or so of Marx's life which has previously been regarded by most biographers as rather unproductive and displaying declining powers. For example, Marx did not complete or prepare for publication volumes 2 and 3 of Capital. And although it is acknowledged that he read enormously and wrote 3,000 pages of notes on this material he did not integrate his results into his earlier schemes. (In particular, he came to the view that the Russian peasant commune could, under certain conditions, become the starting point for a transition to socialism without Russia going through capitalism.)

David McLennan, among other historians, regards it as "evidence that Marx now lacked the power of synthesis" to incorporate the results of his Russian studies into the "grand design" initiated in the first volume of Capital and "no longer had the power to create". (Karl Marx, Harper Colophon Books, page 422.)

Teodor Shanin from the Soviet Union (now domiciled in Britain) and Haruki Wada (a Japanese) present quite a different picture, indicating at least the beginnings of a further intellectual phase of Marx's part played these years. Their case is set out in articles in the British magazine History Workshop: a journal of socialist historians, issue 12.

They base their evidence on a close examination of Marx's changes to successive editions of Capital, and the letters and articles he wrote in his last years, the various drafts he prepared, etc.

In particular, they regard as more than a passing comment the sentence in a letter Marx wrote to the editor of the Russian journal Fatherland Notes:

"He (N.K. Mikhailovskva) feels he absolutely must metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the general path every people is fated to tread ...." (This letter was written in November 1877, but not sent for reasons Wada sets out in his article. It was finally published in Vestnik Narodnoi Voli, Vol 5, December 1886.)

2. "The forces already exist in Australia whose interests would best be served by ending capitalist class rule."

"These classes and social forces are:

1. The working class
(a) Industrial workers, mainly in factories, mines and transport.
(b) Non-manual workers, in trade, shops and offices (but in factories and transport also).
(c) Part of the intellectually and technically trained workers in industries and services.
(d) Rural workers.
(e) Women doing unpaid work at home who move in and out of the workforce.
(f) The unemployed.
(g) Pensioners, retired workers.

2. Women as an oppressed sex.

3. Students (who will mostly become workers or members of the new intermediate strata).

4. The Aboriginal people. Torres Strait Islanders and descendants of the Pacific Islanders forcibly brought to Australia as semi-slave labor at the turn of the century.

5. Social movements of sections of the people, or movements around particular issues.

These are the forces to which the efforts of socialists in class and social struggle should be directed."

—CPA Program, p. 27.

3. Enrico Berlinguer of the Italian Communist Party, although working in very different conditions from those we experience in Australia, put it relevantly in an article in Rinasvita (Dec 4, 1981), entitled "Renewal of politics and the renewal of the PCI":

"... even if to a lesser extent than in other countries of the Western kind, the fact that also in Italy a division has begun to show between considerable strata of the population and the parties must make us reflect. ... here (in reactions to the abortion referendum and the new upsurge in the peace movement) lies the proof of the need for a renewal of the parties and of their ways of engaging in politics, if it is intended to avoid the growth of a difference which can become very dangerous to democracy's destiny ...."

... it is necessary to make up our minds to understand that politics is today called upon to consider as its direct task ... also the solution of those problems which stem from the development of people's existence and the relationships between people and between these and the structures of society and the political system which today marks this society. This is in the current, particular, social, cultural and moral context. ...

... not only must that restrictive conception of politics whereby it becomes reduced to relations, games and skirmishes between parties, between the majority and the opposition, be overcome, and all ends there, but also a traditional concept of social struggle and social existence must be overcome. ... A concept according to which only those masses, those organisations and those movements which express needs and demands of an economic-trade union kind are considered worthy of attention.

"We remain convinced that, in order to renew ourselves and to induce the others to renew themselves, we must maintain the characteristics which make us different, above all, we must organise on new themes and big mass movements ..."