The Communist Party and Revolution

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THE TECHNOLOGICAL POSSIBILITY of a socialist society has existed in Australia for many years now. The present level of production could provide abundance for all. The abolition of capitalism and a fundamental redirection of social structure and purpose could bring universal happiness. That this has not occurred, and in the foreseeable future does not appear likely to occur in Australia, should entail a drastic reappraisal on the part of revolutionaries of method and what are presumed to be facts — both past and present. Such examination may result in a jettisoning of very many ‘sacred’ assumptions and in an emphasis on new forms of revolutionary activity. It will mean forsaking "marxism-leninism" and other dogmas, and replacing them with an open marxist approach toward actual conditions, and not with orthodox marxist-leninist theory which mystifies them.

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The success of the 1917 revolution and those subsequent to it elsewhere, has meant the spread to many countries of the doctrines of means to revolution which worked in those countries. The success of the Party of Lenin brought leninist methods and organisation to socialist parties in countries where conditions were very different from those in pre-revolutionary Russia. The Communist Parties in most advanced capitalist countries still retain the leninist perspective of revolution and revolutionary organisation, but it is precisely in these countries that revolution has not occurred and shows no sign of occurring in the near future. Because they have had revolutions, some view the communist parties as possessing authority in everything. If Australian revolutionaries copy the style of revolutions which have taken place in the economically “backward” countries, and mimic the propaganda of the governments of these countries, they will not help to abolish Australian capitalism. Their actions will have been guided by a ‘marxism’ treated as a dogma and this without understanding of real conditions — only of abstracted ones.

Revolutionaries in Australia cannot simply ignore the Soviet Union and its past, especially if they are involved in an organisation whose past is closely connected with the USSR. The Communist Party of Australia still identifies itself with Soviet socialism because it neither repudiates it nor analyses its past. This cannot be evaded by saying that the way to socialism will be different in each country, for this eludes what is essential in socialism. Socialism does not equal living well with state intervention (as it does with the Social-Democrats), nor is it equivalent to the current Soviet fashion. The CPA should not identify itself with the USSR’s version of ‘socialism’ with its bloody and oppressive history. If the version of socialism that the CPA aims at is in fact contradictory to Soviet socialism, why not say so?

In drafting a program for social change in which the CP occupies an important position, it is surely important to analyse not only capitalism and its past, but also to understand what has passed as socialism and its history. Man’s practice constitutes history, and it is only in terms of this practice (not abstracted and thus empty practice) that the future can be constructed freely. The Stalinist period in the USSR has not been so much understood as repudiated by many Western communists. The question as to how a party, which led a revolution to freedom, legitimates an authoritarian and repressive social system must be viewed in terms other than those of ‘errors’ and ‘aberrations’ of a fundamentally sound socialist practice. (Stalinism is not merely the historical accident of a ‘cult of personality’.)
Similarly, it is unproductive for the CPA to take the attitude that what has been done is done (i.e. of no relevance). A critical analysis of the past, especially where this hurts, might bring more self-awareness and independence. It is impossible to sever oneself from one's past merely by saying that one has done it. If one understands one's mistakes, attitudes and presuppositions ('understands', not 'recognise'), then one is in a position to act freely. This applies to the CPA. If the CPA simply says that it is changing its position without understanding its past, it has not changed fundamentally: it has merely adopted another line which it could change again at any time. A thoroughgoing and critical assessment of the USSR and its history, together with the CPA and its past, might bring at least as much enlightenment as any program about Australia.

The authority of the modern capitalist system over the underlying population does not derive through physical violence. It is in a continual process of legitimising itself through the formal and informal societal institutions. The state is only one part of this system. Any conspiracy theory of modern capitalism is bound to fail for lack of adequate evidence. The bourgeois state naturally works in the interest of the capitalist class. But this by no means shows that the capitalist class directly manipulates the state. While pluralist theories of capitalist society neglect how, and in whose interests, society is actually structured (as contrasted with how the controllers of these institutions say they are structured), vertical or monolithic analyses take too narrow a view of the concept of domination. If controllers of institutions are convinced by the capitalist definition of reality, they need not be told what to do or what to think. People are brought up to view institutionalised inequality as equality, with only the malfunction of the system being regarded as unfair. When the system is running smoothly (as perhaps it might under a Labor Government), it is itself weighted to ensure bourgeois domination. (The hegemonic class culture, by definition, pervades society as the true consciousness.) Bourgeois democracy is seen as providing choices, including the choice not to choose. But the authoritarian nature of the economic system is not regarded as anti-democratic. A peculiar form of meritocracy is often seen to rule factories and businesses — that of those who have fought for the right by making money, despite the 'managerial revolution'. Workers perceive that they have rights, but they often feel that the bosses also have rights. The classical capitalist twofold division into civil society and the state, into capitalist and political systems, still retains much credence.
Under the established bourgeois hegemony, the system produces and reproduces itself. Even revolutionaries tend to legitimise the system by showing that the system is democratic. Naturally, this is only one side of the dialectical relation of revolutionaries to the rest of society, but nonetheless it cannot be ignored.

When social-democratic or communist parties attain a degree of influence, they become accommodated to the system of domination. They begin to see much of the 'reason' behind what had formerly seemed partisan decisions of some of the rulers. They see the difficulties in actually changing structures so deeply embedded in the system. They become subject to enormous economic pressures and threats from the capitalist class which holds a great amount of economic sway. They realise that any change in one sector may bring vast repercussions in others because the undermining of basic values, ways of living and preferences are involved. The easy way out of this is to, for example, nationalise some industry because it would be more 'profitable' and in the 'public interest' in which case other industries may not be nationalised because they are not 'profitable' and would not demonstrably serve the 'public interest'.

For Marx, the proletariat represented the absolute negation of capitalism. The interests of the capitalist are capitalism, and those of the proletariat were necessarily anathema. The proletarian labored for the capitalist for the price of his labor power. The aim of private enterprise was profit for the capitalist. While proclaiming the government for all, and claiming always to act in the 'national interest', the capitalist ideologist, if only because of the structure of the system, was furthering the vested interests of the hegemonic class of capitalists. Since Marx's day, while material conditions have markedly improved for the workers, the central contradiction of capitalism remains: that between the social character of production and the private means of appropriation. While everybody's income has increased, that of the capitalist has increased most. There is nothing today to suggest that the capitalists, under conditions of the new capitalism, are profiting any less than before. If this is so, why do large sections of the proletariat support the capitalist system? How is it that in Australia a Liberal Party Government can be kept in office by the vote of large sections of the working class?

The fact of a politically-quiescent working class, however, does not negate the class model of society. But the class model does not imply that the identity of the agent of historical change is the proletariat. (Unless the proletariat is defined as whoever the agent happens to be. For example, a communist party consisting mainly of intellectuals leading a revolution and defining itself as the proletariat ‘for-itself’, that is as self-conscious, or as representing the proletariat as it ought to be.)

The capitalist system has stabilised itself in Australia to the extent that even many of the goals and needs in the lives of the workers are generated by the system. A better life is defined in terms of material satisfaction provided by a greater quantity of goods produced by the capitalist system. Where living better means earning more, the criticism of capitalism must be based, not on the amount of economic privation experienced, but on the immense difference between real possibility and actuality. The extent to which production does not reflect real need can be measured by the fantastic expenditure on public relations, sales promotion, advertising, and fancy packaging. Artificial needs are imposed on people. So much production is deliberate waste.

Advanced capitalist society is not defined by scarcity. The possibility of sharing the fruits of technological resources among people according to their needs, may threaten capitalism in a way that socialism, as represented by higher wages and more adequate housing, does not. In an ‘affluent society’, where the basic material needs of the great majority are catered for, and where the possibility of ‘living better’ by working harder or longer is seen as actual, where the alternatives are defined as ‘unreal’ or ‘impractical’, that is, are incompatible with the capitalist system, and where ‘national unity’ is prized because of the threat of a real or imagined enemy, the proletariat becomes accommodated.

The contradiction in advanced capitalist society is best evidenced by the possibility of the existence of utopia. Utopia is a ‘good place’ which exists ‘nowhere’. Now that the technological possibility of this good place is rooted in advanced industrial society, there exists an imperative to actualise utopia. Marx wrote in the ‘Preface to the Critique of Political Economy’:

Mankind always sets itself such tasks as it can solve; since looking at the matter more closely it will always be found that the task itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution already exist or are at least in the process of formation.  

Critical concepts lose most of their meaning as they become integrated with the capitalist system. ‘Freedom’ is defined as what we have to preserve, and as what the communists do not
have (cf. "The Free World") or as having the choice between buying different brands of useless objects (free enterprise), or having a letter printed in the capitalist-controlled press (free speech). 'Democracy' is equated with a choice between two parties which only differ in the more efficient means to run capitalism: and this is contrasted with the one-party rule in the USSR. 'Happiness' is being married, with a house, a car and children's education. And so on with 'peace', 'normal', 'rational', 'public interest', 'law and order' and many others. The meaning of an expression is how it is used in the capitalist reality.  

In a situation where one's needs are administered the notion of possibility must be given new meaning. The choice between capitalism and socialism should not be presented as one between Soviet-style socialism and capitalism. Where capitalism defines possibility in terms of a greater quantity of material goods and fewer working hours, socialism or communism defines possibility as universal enjoyment of as many goods as one needed, of liberation of man from abstract division of labor, of a society in which man's relations with his fellows and with nature are no longer alienated and reified, of a non-authoritarian society where decision-making is autonomous, of a society in which waste is not a necessary product, etc.

Workers under neo-capitalism have an interest in the preservation of the system. Life under conditions of modern capitalism is far from unbearable; if sometimes difficult, "that's life, isn't it?" There is always that chance of promotion, strikes can sometimes bring results, and if profits are 'shared', everyone can be a 'capitalist'. People are better off than their fathers and look like being even better off in the not too distant future. People do not want to lose what they have. (This, incidentally, provides one of the reasons for the continued return of the Liberal Government.) The devil they know will not take from them what they already possess. They have a stake in a system that can guarantee incremental improvements for the workers if this means that the capitalists' profits improve substantially. For it is 'possible' for a worker to become a capitalist. Since some have actually done so, there appears to be the abstract possibility of everybody doing so. One of the characteristics of bourgeois society is that only formal possibilities are guaranteed. Everyone has the chance of becoming a capitalist only if few do.

The workers have become wedded to the system that supplies them with their livelihood. They see no sense in giving this up for

some form of Stalinist dictatorship. No other society is seen as 'possible' — the alternatives seem to exhaust the possibilities (The invasion of Czechoslovakia helped the capitalists by apparently demonstrating the impossibility of any 'third' road.) If capitalism delivers the goods, it does not seem worth the risk or trouble to strive for a system which may or may not do so, and which almost certainly will be authoritarian 'at least at the beginning'.

As distinct from previous social transformations the socialist (or communist) revolution must be a conscious one. It is the positive overcoming of capitalism by masses conscious that revolution is necessary to their well-being.

At present, even if there does exist some primitive awareness of the failure of capitalism, a critical consciousness demanding change to socialism or communism belongs to a tiny minority of society. For there to be a revolution the mass of the people must be convinced of the necessity for the transformation of society.

Questions of historical agency for a revolution in Australia are entirely abstract since no pre-revolutionary situation exists (the question must be resolved in historical practice). The preparatory — but nevertheless, essential — foundations must be laid. The rupture in false consciousness, with the consequent critical consciousness will, in the first instance, be an intellectual task. Analysis, critique, propaganda, projection of alternatives, may well be the most important (though by no means the only) tasks of revolutionaries in Australia today. The intellectuals are those most likely to have consciousness of projected possibilities by virtue of the nature of their discourse.

The political organisation most appropriate to the present period in Australia seems to be a loose association of marxists, based around a common set of aims, in which there is no authoritarian structure. The organisation would be primarily devoted to analysis, critique and propaganda.

The organisation would not be a political 'party'. It would not aim at power through parliamentary elections ('power' and 'politics' as defined by capitalist ideologists). Decisions would be by mass meetings, and any elections would be for positions with specific tasks (with right of recall). Members would not be 'bound' to carry out decisions (except of course, those elected for a particular purpose). There would be maximum autonomy for individuals who would be encouraged to form any action or theoretical group they desired.
If socialism is to be possible, the relationships between members of the organisation must be free, and represent in microcosm those of the future society. (As free as possible in that there would be no artificial constraints — quite the contrary.) An authoritarian organisation could only bring an authoritarian 'socialism'. If other forms of organisation become necessary at a given time, they can be formed. Marx and Engels never had a rigid or dogmatic view on Party organisation. Marx even dissolved the League of Communists in 1852 (and did not belong to a political organisation for years afterwards). Engels wrote that particular forms of organisation could in time become ‘fetters’ to the development of revolutionary forces.\(^4\)

The Draft Program of the CPA is a marked improvement on previously adopted programs. However it reflects much of the present division, uncertainty and confusion in the Party and leadership. It is a Draft that makes concessions to everyone, and should therefore satisfy no-one.

This article, it is hoped, challenges some of the assumptions underlying the Draft. The following are a few summary remarks in three important areas of the Draft.

1. **Attitude to the USSR and other Socialist Countries.** The Draft, in effect, blames Western Imperialism for the oppression and lack of freedom in Socialist countries. It justifies both past and present Stalinism in the terms of the Soviet ideologists viz. that socialism must develop slowly because it is threatened by Imperialism. Thus lack of progress, aberrations and invasions, though unfortunate, are necessary.\(^5\)

The attitude towards the Socialist countries marks the inconsistency in the CPA’s position. It is loathe to view the USSR and its history at all objectively, fearing to loosen ties with the Soviet regime and its Australian devotees still further. It seems afraid to criticise the USSR at any fundamental level, although the Soviet version of socialism bears little resemblance (even in spirit) to the socialism advocated in the Draft. The USSR would score very low in the CPA’s ‘Charter of Democratic Rights’. The CPA can achieve little credibility with anyone other than fanatical admirers of the USSR if it continues to pussyfoot about the USSR, if it attempts to justify the unjustifiable. In order to be an

effective communist party the CPA must also understand its own past.

2. **Consciousness:** A major flaw in the Draft is the lack of an analysis of capitalist false consciousness. If bourgeois domination takes the form of manipulation, what is required is a complete rupture in that consciousness. The possession by the masses of a critical consciousness is a basic prerequisite for revolution.

3. **Aims:** The Draft's adumbration of the guidelines of 'The New Society' bears more resemblance to a **transitional** program towards a new society than to a rough approximation of a socialist society.

Priorities are not allocated to the features. The abolition of the White Australia Policy finds itself on a level with workers' control. Social-democratic and liberal policies of the ominous sounding 'minimum living wage' and 'social responsibility in science' are advocated.

The difference between reform and revolution lies in whether the whole conglomeration of demands can be realised within the system. One of the problems with the features of "The New Society" is that most of them could constitute the program of a social democratic party. The real possibilities inherent in our society are not taken seriously.

**Communism** should be the immediate objective of the CPA.

5. It is incredible that the leadership of the CPA which was among the first and most forthright critics of the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia should write in the Draft:

"Heroism in the revolutionary struggle and achievements in socialist construction by the peoples of the socialist countries are a source of inspiration for the forces of progress everywhere. But the struggle between imperialism and the socialist countries is not a simple one. This struggle has restricted the power of imperialism to act in its own interests. It has also sometimes conditioned and restricted the full development of socialism and correct relations between socialist countries, with accompanying negative effects on the appeal of socialism in other countries."