Discussion

- Eric Aarons

Since its inception, but particularly from last year, ALR has set out to publish articles by or about various writers whose interpretations of and approach to marxism show wide differences. These differences are not confined to problems of application of generally accepted principles, or to tactical questions, but go to fundamentals, as the editorial survey of the Australian Left in No. 35 pointed out. By and large, similar differences exist within each country, internationally, and within both ‘old’ and ‘new’ Left.

As yet, however, ‘here has been little direct public contention between the different viewpoints. The time has now come when well-considered polemics – i.e., polemics aimed at clarifying fundamentals – are essential. In this the communists should be far more active than they have so far been.

Of course, there are still major obstacles. On the one hand, those who are theoretically minded are still largely tied up in their own efforts at self-clarification, with attitudes over-influenced by past differences and animosities. On the other hand, the theoretically minded are still a small minority of Australian revolutionaries, the majority of whom still consider theoretical work and contention the self-indulgent ‘luxury’ of a few. In part this is a tradition in the English-speaking countries; in part it stems from the mistaken view that all the main theoretical problems were worked out 100 years ago by Marx, 60 years ago by Lenin, 50 years ago by Trotsky, or 30 years ago by Mao (with something later from the cultural revolution thrown in). Many believe that what remains are problems of application of these universally known truths, and this, it is usually held, is in any case a practical rather than a theoretical question. Others consider the problem to be one of finding the correct interpretation of the existing texts, or confine the scope of theoretical work to individual questions of strategy or tactics.

But, as will be clear from the book ‘Philosophy for an Exploding World: today’s values revolution,’ I maintain that the issues go far deeper – to foundations and to total conceptions, to philosophical and methodological questions, which have a bearing on all others, including principles which may be held to more or less without change, because the point from which they are viewed is different.

This does not mean that other questions are unimportant. But, besides requiring attention in their own right, their clarification will also reflect on the wider aspects. For example, the changes in the operation of the modern capitalist economy, not yet adequately embraced in marxist theory, clearly include the effect of political, state capitalist class. This raises questions about the degree of ‘objectivity’ of economic laws. Similarly, consideration of theoretical issues involved in Women’s Liberation may lead to the conclusion that there are factors involved besides ones directly related to relations of production, and, consequently, class. Recognition of these things could not fail to modify the overall ‘world-picture’ of marxists, while on the other hand such modification is essential for the proper analysis of the individual problems themselves.

When, at the beginning of his revolutionary career, Lenin stressed that ‘without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement’ he had more in mind than the general importance of theory exemplified in the works of Marx and Engels. Firstly, the trend he led was only in the process of formation, its features were not yet properly elaborated, and it had not yet settled accounts with other trends which would, if successful, in his view divert the revolutionary movement. Secondly, being international, a revolutionary movement had not only to avoid narrow nationalism, but also to critically analyse international experience, which had not been done. Thirdly, Lenin stressed the newness of the tasks faced by revolutionaries in Russia compared with what had been faced before in other countries.

If these three aspects are still relevant today, as I think they are, the importance of theory will be seen to be greater today than ever before.

1) While it is usually assumed that the communist trend in the revolution is well defined today, a little consideration will show that one of the main features of this trend at present is that it is suffering a crisis of identity – what Franz Marek, in the article in this issue, calls a ‘spiritual crisis of the working class movement.’ After the collapse of the Stalin mythos, whose theoretical counterpart was the ‘Marxism-Leninism’ shaped in that period, on which all older communists were reared, there have it is true been various tactical and even strategic re-orientations. But even the deepest of these – which certainly includes those of the Communist Party of Australia – have not succeeded in replacing the old theoretical basis with a more adequate one. (This is the one apparent disadvantage suffered by the members of the CPA compared with the followers of the CPSU – the Socialist Party of Australia – China – the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist), and some of the Trotskyist trends, in that the total certainty and ‘ability’ to explain everything within their ‘theoretical system’ that these groups subjectively feel they have, is lacking. It is of course only an apparent advantage – it makes them feel better in themselves, but doesn’t help the actual development of the class struggle; rather, it hinders it).

2) The experiences internationally are far richer and more varied than 70 years ago. The impact of the former colonial world (often referred to as ‘the East,’ but of course including Africa and Latin America) on the Europe-centred marxism of Lenin’s day is immense, but unassimilated. The experiences of severe conflicts within and between socialist-based countries have not been adequately analysed. And there are new phenomena ranging from the world-influencing struggle of the Vietnamese people, to France 1968.
3) The tasks faced by revolutionaries today are probably even more unique than those impacting Lenin. In addition to what has been referred to above, the economic and social picture of modern capitalism is far different from anything envisaged then or thought possible. New issues, broadly referred to as those of ecology, embracing population, resources, pollution, etc., are raising questions of perspective and values, as well as questions of political strategy and tactics, and problems such as alienation, and others in the area called 'psychological' are being seen as increasingly important.

But even these considerations do not exhaust the importance of theory today, for conceptions of the very nature and functions of a theory are undergoing some changes. Until recently, especially in the English-speaking world, the conception of what was a 'science' or a 'scientific theory' tended to be guided by reductionist and determinist ideas which were thought to be modelled on physics, which had had outstanding successes. Other disciplines such as biology, and even more 'social science,' were either not regarded as science at all, or the aim was to make them so by discovering a basis which could make them like physics was thought to be. It was believed that the nature of the physical world, and its movement, could be completely explained and predicted by knowledge of the laws governing elementary particles, then thought to be very few in number.

Today these ideas, while still held by many as an ideological attitude, are further and further from the actual state of affairs and possibilities. Professor Robert May describes the problem in his article on ecology in ALR No. 36 in these words: 'Essentially all the brilliant triumphs of the physical sciences over the past three centuries are with LINEAR problems, in which a very complicated whole can be (conceptually or actually) disassembled, studied simple piece by simple piece, and the whole complex reassembled, and understood as no more than the (linear) sum of its parts... On the other hand a non-linear system cannot be understood by adding up isolated component pieces. One must study the whole, as such.'

If biological and ecological systems are par excellence non-linear in this sense, then human society, especially in its ecological setting, is doubly so, for there is in addition the enormous added factor of human consciousness (and, to use Lenin's words, 'passion, will and fantasy' as well), of human attitudes, expectations, desires and efforts to realise them. Thus the goals of explaining social phenomena purely by reference to 'primary elements' such as the economy, and expecting precise prediction (as the prediction of the 1929 economic crisis and the second world war appeared relatively precise) is more and more difficult to hold to as possible of realisation, or as the indispensable basis for revolutionary strategy. (There are some ridiculous caricatures of prediction, such as the Socialist Labour League's prediction of a terrible economic crash each year, undeterred by last year's failure. One day they might click, but that will not be prediction in any scientific sense. Still less can they claim to know that a political collapse will follow an economic collapse).

This does not mean giving up theoretical efforts; on the contrary they should be intensified. But to make the success of a theory, or its scientific character, dependent on its ability to perform the impossible task of reducing the movement of a complex system to that of simple entities, or on the making of exact predictions, should be given up in favor of a more 'dialectical' consideration of main possibilities, particularly as these are impacted by the conscious effort of revolutionary forces.

In this way, theory becomes not only an analysis, but also a program to 'make things happen' (in light of carefully considered possibilities), and a means of orientation in events when they do happen (more often than not unexpectedly -- e.g., May 1968 in France). Trends distinguish themselves from each other by the direction in which they place their efforts (which of the possible lines of development they select) and in the orientation they take up to what is actually happening. Only by a certain minimum degree of common theoretical 'like-mindedness' (as distinct from attachment to a great power or personality, which only leads to theoretical apologetics, sometimes 'right,' but never theoretically so) can the necessary degree of organisational cohesion be attained. This is true whatever the form of organisation. Thus those 'practically oriented' revolutionaries who disregard theory because it is not practical, those who think, for example, that a major part of the present problems of the CPA can be solved by organisational changes, will prove quite unpractical because they are ignoring the roots of the problems.

But this is not all. A theory also serves as, is the necessary core of, any counter-hegemonic body of ideas -- that is, a complex of outlooks, attitudes, programs; the basis of living, actions and tactics which can act as a disintegrating force on the prevailing consensus maintaining the system, while also providing a positive alternative focus for developing a revolutionary movement. The importance of developing such a counter-hegemony, or counter-consensus, especially in developed capitalist countries, as a crucial point of the revolutionary process, is becoming more and more accepted. To fail to develop a viable theory, or to content oneself with repetition of 'well-known truths' (even if they are truths, and not just beliefs and wishes instead of truths, well-known or otherwise), and without relating such theory to other conceptions, to the experiences of action, or the existing hegemonic views with which they have to contend, is to make empty any talk of counter-hegemony.

Historians of science (e.g., Kuhn, Radnitzky and others) have developed a convincing pattern of the typical life cycle of a theory. First there is the period of formation of the theory, which reaches its high point with the work of one or a few men who make a 'model' analysis of the field covered by the theory. Then, under the guidance of this 'paradigm case' much valuable work is done, and the
number of followers expands. Then the tendency is for the school to become institutionalised, and work to be concerned rather with 'confirming' and supporting the theory instead of really using it and developing it in its interaction with further results of experience and observation. This was the fate of marxism for a long time, and it is still largely so today. But there are indications that a new period of extensive genuine work and development may have begun, or at least that an optimistic possibility exists for this to happen.

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This is of international as well as national concern. It is customary to speak of the 'world communist movement' as though it were a body made up of like-minded national detachments, concerting and coordinating actions towards common goals. This however is the myth rather than the reality, the wish rather than the fact. It is something most revolutionaries yearn for, conscious of the increased strength that can accrue through genuine mutual support and moving together against a weakened imperialism.

However, fragmentation is increasing internationally, as it is within most countries. 'Common action,' for example on Vietnam, to the degree that it was achieved, came about in some ways in spite of, rather than because of, any common views of the international communist movement. Both the Soviet Union and China rendered considerable help to the Vietnamese, but did so, with little coordination of their efforts, as a result of their own different conceptions, even though they both claim 'marxism-leninism' and 'internationalism' to be the basis of what they did. The same considerations did not apply to the CP's in other countries where they are not in power, but what each did arose from the analysis, conscience and possibilities of each party rather than from any discussions or resolutions among them (though there were such from time to time). It would be difficult indeed to point to any significant conscious coordination of effort among CP's in recent times, whereas plenty of examples of the opposite can be pointed to. These differences, going as far as invasion and threatened invasion, pose great theoretical problems as being theoretical and the difficulty of getting to the roots of such problems (for there are many levels at which they can be considered), to pressures, particularly from the CPSU, and such tactical considerations as avoiding accusations of 'revisionism.

In the case of the CPSU, which considers itself to be the guardian of the 'purity' of marxist theory, not only has that theory been bowdlerised in the 'marxist-leninist' 'systematisation' mentioned above, but even what is proclaimed within this limited framework on official and ritual occasions is increasingly departed from in practice. For instance, 'reliance on the masses of workers' is given verbal recognition by all, but many officials, high and low, privately make no secret of their contempt for the masses and their view that the elite (themselves, with their very unmarxist and jealously guarded privileges) is the only force 'holding things together.' Similarly, considerations of principle are often quite openly subordinated to 'friendship with (i.e., no criticism of) the Soviet Union' and the important corollary -- 'opposition to China.'

These are not recent phenomena, and are now probably rather well-known, but whether experiences and practices are good or bad there is little evidence of a serious theoretical effort to sum them up. Similarly in China; whatever is thought of the cultural revolution, it was certainly an important event, and even leaving aside less principled ingredients such as struggles for power, has important aspects that bear on fundamentals of marxism. For example (and probably reflecting what the Chinese said to them, though it may have been also their own conclusion), Bruce McFarlane and Ted Wheelwright say:

"It will be sufficient to emphasise Mao's theory that classes continue to exist under socialism... These are not classes in the old marxist sense of direct relation to the ownership of property ... but functional classes of work-
This view of classes and class struggle may well have some substance, but that is not the point here. If it is true this has considerable bearing on basic theoretical conceptions of society and revolutionary struggle before and following the overthrow of capitalism. Likewise the respective weights of and the relationships between material, economic and other such factors, and of political decision, moral and other subjective factors at different times also clearly go to theoretical fundamentals, but are not so discussed.

When the Communist International was formed in 1919 there was for a time the common theoretical-political task, in the capitalist countries, of breaking with reformism, theoretically, politically and organisationally, and establishing a separate communist trend. After that initial period, the material and moral ascendancy of the Russians (because they had made a revolution), and their increasing tendency especially under Stalin to regard the world movement as something to be manipulated in subordination to their conceptions and interests, led to damaging consequences which were, however, later overlaid by the struggle against fascism.

The dissolution of the International in 1943 was more apparent than real, for the conditions referred to above still remained, as became evident in such concerted campaigns as that against Yugoslavia in 1948, and the later revealed growing conflict with China. In the case of China after 1960, however, whatever other justifications they might have had, these were largely vitiated by the attempts of the CPC to 'take over' from the CPSU on the same wrong basis of de facto domination. (In some intriguing material recently published, which may be authentic, there is some implication of a mild self-criticism by Mao over too much interference in other parties.)

To point to these things is not to claim that they are to be easily overcome, nor is it to hanker for the 'good old days' of 1919 and shortly after, or to expect that theoretical discussions will solve all problems. These issues are raised rather in the light of the specific conditions of the present period which, as I see it, is one in which the key task is infusing some reality into the 'international movement,' is to try to move towards a new consensus in the theoretical field, where the old one has long since crumbled.

Yet there are strong obstacles to this course, even within the CPA which, despite its limited personnel and material resources, is otherwise in a good position to pursue it, because of its previous struggles to establish its independent position against all attempts at intimidation through moral and material pressures such as splits. These obstacles mainly derive from the tendency to subordinate fundamental and long-term issues to short-term and tactical considerations, perhaps in the belief that 'later' it will be more convenient to do it. There is also the tradition internationally (grown up since Lenin's time, and in contradiction to his practice), of avoiding disagreements because they 'weaken the common front against imperialism.' As stated previously, however, this 'common front' does not in reality contain much substance because there is no underlying 'like-mindedness.' This can only be restored or created by laying new foundations in the place of those which have been disintegrating over recent decades. Both within a country and internationally, it is true that a movement which lacks a vision stagnates or even goes backwards.

To advocate such a course is not to propose consideration of negative experiences or to recommend a reckless attack on all and everything previously 'protected' from criticism by a misapplication of the important principle of non-interference in others' internal affairs. Nor is it to share the conceit of those who, following earlier traditions, think it possible as a result of reasoning from one or two general principles or political tenets to pronounce off the cuff on the situation in any country or the line of any party. Comment there should be, however, unrestricted except that it should be based on a real study of the situation, and an effort to 'put oneself in the position of others' as far as possible. In most cases, there is no call for organisational decisions to be made on the political questions involved, and still less is this appropriate for theoretical issues. From well-informed analyses those interested will be able to draw their own conclusions.

The absence of theoretical polemics in the communist movement has been the norm for many years. But although there is no reason merely to copy what was done in an earlier period, it should not be forgotten that these were the normal and expected thing till about 1920, and played an essential part in forging the degree of consensus that was achieved. That there are cogent reasons for theoretical contention at the present time has been argued above. But there are different kinds of polemics. There are those where heat replaces light, where labelling and name-calling obscure rather than reveal issues, creating a climate where there is subjective animosity leading to replies in kind. This is the most common kind of polemics, copied from the worst, instead of the best, aspects of the polemics of the days of Marx and Lenin. The best aspect of these, which should be emulated, is that concentration is on revealing fundamental issues and underlying differences, and unravelling their purport for perspective and action.