

## **A Revisionist Approach to the Marxist Concept of Revolution**

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At a Philippine Studies conference held some time ago in London I had the occasion to observe that for its Filipino adherents, Marxist socialism was largely a matter of “imagined comprehension.” It got some laughs all right, but I was not unaware that this private joke — a play on words around a term coined by Benedict Anderson — could make the Western leftists in attendance uneasy. After all, it is not only Filipinos who have had to grapple with the practical consequences of the loaded signifiers in which Marxist discourse abounds. Unfortunately, keepers of the faith the world over have been left to their own hermeneutic devices since Marx and Engels (inconveniently) passed away. It is also doubtful whether the famous duo would be in full possession of their faculties if they were still alive today. How they would have accounted for all the problems arising from the earnest implementation of the Marxist project over the past 150 years, especially in the so-called socialist states such as the ex-Soviet Union, the ex-Yugoslavia, the ex-German Democratic Republic, China, Vietnam, Cuba, etc., would have made for a very piquant discussion indeed.

If anything, the April 6, 1999 roundtable discussion only confirmed my view that “being Marxist” is a question of conjectural and selective understandings. With the possible exception of one or two papers,<sup>1</sup> what emerges therefrom is an extremely unproblematic and unidimensional narrative of the Marxist adventure since the publication of the Manifesto in 1848. But in truth I did not come to the discussion expecting pleasant surprises: a gathering of Marxists is bound to be an evening of varying shades of dogma. Irony of ironies, “doubt everything” is always the first encumbering principle that gets thrown out of their baggage. Thus they are not likely to entertain, even out of curiosity, the question as to whether Marx was himself a doubter of his own utopian project. And yet I understand their reticence: what would their world-changing ideology sound like if uncertainty were its constant norm?

For local true believers and those in exile as well, Marxism's foundational text is still sacred writ (heresy is always the other's fault). It is as if nothing had happened in the past 150 years that could, in the mind of most of the April 6 discussants, possibly invalidate the Manifesto, or even just put certain of its premises in question. Neither the gulags, nor the Cheka/KGB, nor the deportations, nor the internal visas, nor the suppression of civil liberties, nor the empty shop shelves, nor the siege mentality peculiar to communist States, nor the massive rejection of Marxism-Leninism in the satellite buffer States or in the ex-USSR for that matter, nor the undisguised restoration of the free-market system in China, Vietnam, even in Cuba: none of the above nudged the discussants towards a frank search for the answer to why there is such a discrepancy between the theory and the practice.<sup>2</sup> But let's not belabor the point. The dogmatism of the so-called hardliners comes with the territory, so to speak. But what about those who, in recuperating a humanist Marx, seek consolation in anti-Stalinism, yet precisely because of it are deprived of an undogmatic explanation for the devaluation of Marxist theory and practice?

This commentary focuses on that aspect of the Marxist discourse which, it seems to me, has served both to enhance its appeal and (not simultaneously, to be sure) to undermine its own objectives: viz., the problematic of revolution. More precisely, I wish to call attention to the exacerbated representation in the Marxist-Leninist doxa of the revolution's historical timeliness ("ripeness," preparedness, aptitude, inevitability), which in turn seems to be the consequence of yet another distortion, that is to say the misreading and misapplication of the experience of the French revolution. It practically goes without saying that this is so much knowledge after the fact, i.e. I have come to these following conclusions after my own practical experience — limited, it is true — and, starting in the early 1980s, my reflections on what I perceived to be the vulnerabilities of Marxism, in both its theoretical and its practical dimensions. I therefore **assume**, as the French would say, whatever prejudices this limited practice and this introspectiveness may have engendered.

### **The Revolutionary Temper**

There are all sorts of reasons, ranging from the complicated to the simple, accounting for the failure of Marxism to "deliver." To begin with the complicated (I essentially mean jargon-laden) ones: scientific socialism,

so-called, is actually an oxymoron; the pauperization of the working class, where it has happened at all, has not resulted in its revolutionization, and besides the concepts *proletariat* and *vanguard* have proved everywhere to be prone to substitutionism; changes at the economic base have failed to effect durable changes in the political/cultural superstructure and vice-versa; the Gramscian idea of hegemony works well for the bourgeoisie but not for the working class; as a motive force nationalism still has the edge over internationalism; etc. The simple reason — yes, there is just one — is that at present in the real world it is not yet time for the good society that Marxists of all stripes mean when they give words to the idea of socialism planted in their minds. That is, if one believes that there is a time at all for socialism, as in “to everything there is a season.”

When will it ever be time, then? The revolutionary idiom replies in explicit or implicit ways, but its message always boils down to: ***it is never too early for socialism, here and now.*** The so-called professional revolutionary has little patience with hairsplitting or waiting for the right alignment of the famous “objective conditions” for the bourgeois State to be “smashed.” He won’t allow the status quo to define the course of events; only reformists do that. (But smart Marxists have caught on that by accepting to be theoreticians they have no pressing obligation to match actions with words.) Whether as theoretician or as street-marching militant, the revolutionary is not the “subjective force” for nothing. As a conscious element he must change the world, since, he read or heard somewhere, Marx said so (very few Marxists are ironists, and vice-versa). And the run-of-the-mill revolutionary cannot help but be literal-minded, since the incendiary rhetoric favored by Marx and his Leninist exegetes doesn’t bother with nuances: “smash the bourgeois State,” “the expropriator is expropriated”, “violence is the midwife of History” resonate like so many clarion calls to direct action. Do violence to time, do violence to institutions: if he has not yet understood this at the very start, the revolutionary eventually comes to regard the discourse of violence as the essence of his chosen “profession.”

With the October Revolution as their supreme referent and legitimizer, a group of professional conspirators has little difficulty imagining that *their* revolution also consists of forcing the issue, of hastening society’s arrival at that point in the trajectory of its development which their theory has anticipated for. For those Western and Asian revolutionaries who have so much as posed the question, what does it matter if human

society is not yet organized for an economy beyond or in any case without capitalism, without social classes (especially the capitalists<sup>3</sup>)? If a classless society is the ideal future arrangement — and if it is inevitable, as all good Marxists believe — why not achieve it as soon as possible? It would be pointless to preach revolution, as this is understood by Marxists, and Hamlet-like refrain from *carpe diem*. But from hindsight it is obvious that the problem is not just one of simplistic logic: it is the means, i.e. the Marxist revolution itself, which ultimately compromises the end, the utopian classless society. By overvaloring human agency, the Marxist cult of revolution makes the idea of a vanguard of “professional revolutionaries” inevitable, the logic of which insures that the single-minded, the ruthless, the wily, the machiavellian revolutionaries prevail over the weak and indecisive elements. The same observation might of course be made about the Jacobins; but the crucial difference is that the latter’s historical moment had truly and objectively arrived, and all the armies on earth could not have stopped it (more on this later). With the Marxist-Leninists, subjective desires and a privileged reading of the mature, anti-humanist Marx overdetermine the timing of the decisive moment.

### **The Inevitability of Authoritarianism**

The Khmer Rouge took a classless society to the letter, killing one-fourth of the entire Cambodian population in the furtherance of that idea. Such purists in the late 1970s were shocked: certainly there was nothing in Marx that could be literally interpreted as sanctioning or ordering this barbaric procedure. (And the Khmer Rouge theoreticians themselves are not known to have physically participated in the killing.) But it is dangerous, not just naïve, to presume innocence on the part of an ideology which encourages an understanding of socialism as a system finally rid, by all means available, of the free market and bourgeois democracy. Detractors of the Khmer Rouge who cringe at the very idea of Marx in the boondocks should not forget that atrocities have been committed by “revolutionaries” even in technologically advanced societies like Czechoslovakia and East Germany, not just in backward Cambodia. They should also remember that Lenin made Marxism, or at least his version of it, theoretically available to all non-Western societies.

One cannot accelerate the pace of history with impunity, above all when the putative end goal of the historical process is only imagined or

conjectured. The price to pay for this shortcut is Stalinism: a population's acquiescence to the exercise of power which cannot be obtained through habitus, understandings of traditional legitimacy and "common sense" can certainly be enforced by coercive means. How the Bolsheviks thought their police state could ever last in that conception and form can perhaps only be explained by their selective reading of Marx, which may not have been so inaccurate after all. Lenin and his followers may be forgiven for their prejudice, since the Marxist project is nothing if it is not about "changing the world" long before the change — on whose meaning(s) an endless debate can take place — is called for, or even necessary. The change is of course *imaginable*, in which case the only restraint is the amount of coercive infrastructure available to the regime in power. It goes without saying that for these revolutionaries, the seizure of power is calculated in view of consolidating it afterwards.

Unfortunately for the anti-Stalinists their attempt at problematization, i.e. their demonization of the man and the eponymous system he helped to build, is problematic itself: it fails to account for the phenomenon of eventual stalinization of all revolutionary movements or regimes — assuming that they were not already stalinoid from the very start. In any event, once in power their promethean motivation to push the world in the right direction becomes a conservative reaction against any other change, because their self-ascribed hegemony is tenuous and they can only institute reform at the risk of losing their hold on power (vide Khrushchev and Gorbachev). The trait of extraordinary zeal associated with Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries thus has a reverse side of the coin which the theory cannot — does not have to — explain away. But Mao's idea of "the unity of opposites" may generally be considered correct even if he was light years away from thinking about its applicability to himself; it is not irrelevant to recall at this point one of the most humorous episodes in the history of the local Left : the denunciation, by his own anti-Sison comrades, of Popoy Lagman as a Stalinist .<sup>4</sup> One can almost imagine Marx still alive in say 1989 (the year of the fall of the Wall) crying out, "my kingdom for a Stalin!" For if the Georgian had never existed, he would have had to be invented: somebody had to take the rap for all the crimes wittingly or unwittingly committed in the name of the ruling ideology, even before Lenin's death in 1923. But the problem is really the anti-Stalinist's: for as long as his political correctness inhibits his taking a second look at the objective implications of the Marxist project, he will always be like a dog chasing its own tail.

All this is old hat for most serious scholars and/or practitioners, and especially since the late 1980s there have been countless opportunities for every one so minded to reflect on the practical results of the revolutionary theory. Why some self-styled Marxists still do not come to terms with Leninism, Stalinism and all their variants is a question that in fairness only they can answer; but if the drift of the April 6 discussion is any indication, there won't be any real debate forthcoming. Could it be that beyond the imagined comprehension of the orthodoxy, there lies only the theoretical void?

It is crucial to the debate to recognize that a genealogical misrepresentation was committed about a century ago. Contrary to the truth, most Filipinos of all political persuasions suppose Lenin to have been the "natural heir" of Marx (the two never even met); but then, what would the 20<sup>th</sup>-century concept of revolution have been without that imagined heritage? Without the successful grab of State power by the Bolsheviks, the idea of a Marxist state would never have taken the shape it did in humanity's imagination. But the idea that the Bolshevik victory represented a vindication of Marx is based on a fiction: when the Tsar abdicated, then when the provisional government fled before the Bolshevik offensive, it did not mean that Russian society was ripe for the implementation of Marx's vision as its State doctrine; it simply meant that once again in a Hobbesian world, "might made right;" also, that the absence of a civil society in Russia made the naked seizure of power that much easier. A scenario that could be (and was) easily replicated in several other backward societies, to be sure. But the more relevant point is that the representation of Marx-as-world-changer was *meant* to be hijacked and monopolized by such impatient revolutionaries as the Bolsheviks, given their penchant for the voluntarism that is immanent in the Marxist project.

### **Drawing the Wrong Lessons**

Both Marx and Lenin are represented as assiduous students of history. Their vocation was not to be mere historians, however. They studied the tangled train of events making up the genesis, development and eventual fates of human communities, from the family to the nation-state to the empire, with emphasis on the economic underpinnings of a given community. Marx in particular made an impressive analysis of the rise of the bourgeoisie to its place as the dominant class of his day. But

from there to draw the conclusion that the next ruling class would be the proletariat, and that the latter would itself lead the movement towards the abolition of all classes, including itself, defies both logic and historical precedent. Of course, Marx wished to break with conventional readings of historical processes. But his incursion into futurology was, in hindsight, unnecessary and even dangerous because his optimistic findings were not supported by the “evidence,” and because of the social-engineering spin that his faithful legions would eventually put on his projections. The sacralization of the proletariat done in his name put undue pressure on this construct of a social class to perform, to “be up to” the ideological expectations projected upon it. But the mythical working-class consciousness never materialized, at least not at the level of a critical mass anywhere in the world. It remained for Leninists to sanction the practice of a non-worker vanguard to represent and simulate the proletariat even where it did not exist, or if it were refractory to the claims of ideology. It may be reasonably be argued that those two non-proletarians, Marx and Engels, themselves showed the way.

The French revolutionary myth captured the imagination of many Europeans, but it was only Lenin and his followers who, drawing on the paradigm offered by Marx, deemed Russia ready for a Jacobin-inspired, but still subjectively Communist, revolution.<sup>5</sup> Lenin’s brainchild, however, was a procustean construct of dubious value for his native land and in fact quite different from what Marx had in mind. The particular conditions of late 18<sup>th</sup> century French society were only superficially similar to those of the Russian one (just as the conditions of Philippine mainstream society in the 1960s-1970s were different from those of China in the 1930s-1940s, but then the Marcos regime obliged the CPP-NPA, and how). Whereas the outbreak of the French Revolution became objectively inevitable due to the resistance put up by an obsolete and reactionary feudal regime to the presence of a new, democratic, dynamic and enlightened order “whose time had come” and neither should nor could any longer be delayed, the mechanics of the Bolshevik takeover constituted nothing less than a deliberate forcing of a shortcut toward a presumed future, a wager that took for granted the leapfrogging of a whole historical period several centuries long during which the evolution of free enterprise, pluralist politics, the rule of law and the creation of civil society would presumably have occurred. No such leapfrogging took place in the context of the French Revolution: the economic, political and cultural institutions of the bourgeoisie, not those of an imaginary

proletariat, were quite obviously its only available horizon in that pre-Marxian time, and most of these remain solidly in place today, apparently because they are still adequate for the job. (The same observation is true of the institutions more or less coeval with the Philippine Revolution of a hundred years ago.)

This is not to insist that all human communities **must** undergo the free enterprise stage, etc., in a strictly linear fashion, but to make a long story short, the historian really cannot argue with the natural inclination, so far, of human economic behavior. Marxist ideologues cannot avoid sounding normative in this respect, however, for they **know** that a superior economic and political system lies ahead. To denounce the market as an aberrant artifact that deserves to be eliminated forthwith from the face of the earth is a common practice among Marxists, and a logical (in the sense of plausible) one too within the framework of their premises. But how can they problematize the supposed aberration in the first place without unwittingly representing all human beings all over the world as credulous, self-destructing savages? This difficulty is evaded, of course, by de-centering the debate; by depicting History as being shaped so far in a blind and random manner by forces which unenlightened mankind naturally cannot comprehend and much less control. Marxist socialism on the other hand eliminates contingency, enshrines reason and freedom, and puts mankind at the helm of its destiny. **Quod erat demonstrandum.** This is admittedly a compelling argument, especially for intellectuals who may find in it the basis of a better religion. But secular religions cannot offer the kind of solace which all true believers seem to prefer.

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A few decades before the October Revolution, Eduard Bernstein dared to think the unthinkable and proposed to his Social-Democrat comrades that their party could do better in the German political arena if they undertook a certain realignment, namely if they toned down their radical Marxist rhetoric to make it conform with their real-life policies, which were reformist anyway. Let's admit we're all reformist, Bernstein urged, since the Marxist vision of cataclysmic change has been belied by the acts, values and beliefs of contemporary European society and by no less than our own party. For his pains Bernstein was spurned by many of his comrades and worse, was highly praised by anti-socialist quarters.<sup>6</sup>

Then, in the aftermath of the “successful” Bolshevik revolution, Bernstein’s project was overtaken by the split instigated by Lenin between socialists and communists on a global scale. However, Bernstein’s convictions were upheld by those realists who as Social-Democrats no longer had any reason to apologize for their reformism. The only loss they sustained was the questionable privilege of calling themselves Marxist revolutionaries. Some local so-called leftists could take note.

Calling for revolution, 150 years after the Manifesto, is not an innocent act. Yet one can well understand how certain durable features of the Philippine sociopolitical landscape can tempt even peaceful souls into entertaining thoughts of violence and totalitarianism. Probably one solution lies in a radical change of vocabulary; the old one (which, let’s not forget, was once known as “modern”) clearly no longer suffices. Those who argued that EDSA represented a better revolutionary paradigm also have a lot of explaining to do — for example, why the Marcoses and their minions are back in business as if nothing had happened in 1986. Corollarily, in this “runaway world” dominated by globalization, the notion that hackers incarnate the post-Marxist idea of global revolution, and the possibility that they might even succeed in endangering the corporate giants and nation-state superpowers of the developed world using strategies more efficient than those deployed by the Marxists, should not be dismissed off hand. Apologists of Marx and Engels still make excuses to the effect that the latter never foresaw the configurations of late 20<sup>th</sup> century society: although well-meaning, this reasoning effectively shackles the two founding fathers to their 19<sup>th</sup> century mindset, making them quite useless for contemporary purposes. But isn’t that precisely what has happened, in the absence of more convincing arguments? In any event, the times call for a long-delayed clearing of the air around here. After all, Marxists have nothing to lose but their ideological chains. ❁

### Endnotes

- 1) . The overall commentary made here is confined to those seven papers (those of P. Abinales, R. Casiple, P. Gonzales, R. Gueco, F. Nemenzo, F. Pascual and J. Ma. Sison, respectively) which were made available before the discussion; I obviously do **not** refer to those which may have been revised in the meantime. I also understand that this published version presents only four papers; this does not in any way change the tenor of my critique.
- 2) Pat Gonzales urges an irreverent evaluation of Marxist theory, but holds back from doing so herself. Her critique consists of contending that the theory’s weakness derives from the absence of a feminist perspective (obviously) and its fixation on modernization. But

let's be fair: what is Marxism itself if not a creature of its modernizing times in Western Europe?

Ramon Casiple exhorts, not socialists, but socialism itself to "return to its roots," etc., as if this could be done without human agency. Mikhail Gorbachev also called for the same, and met with spectacular failure (maybe he should have tried it in the US, or Japan, or in Germany?). But Casiple is right on this point: ironically, socialism has to go beyond Marx and Engels if it is to emancipate itself from "quasi-religious dogma."

3. Here the so-called national-democratic model poses an interesting programmatic question. Taking liberties with the original orthodoxy, and inspired in the first place by Lenin, national-democracy "compromises" with the capitalist stage of development in theory. But either out of impatience or simply because there is no significant capitalist sector left after the revolution, its practitioners go right ahead with a conventional "socialist development" which reposes on the simple principle of the criminalization of the ownership of private means of production. This was the pattern in national-democratic regimes like China and Vietnam, until the realities of the domestic and global market economy forced them to revert to a growth model theoretically dependent on the so-called national bourgeoisie in the late 1970s and the mid-1980s, respectively.
4. The irony is that Lagman himself had previously broken away from the Sison camp, denouncing it in the mainstream press as Stalinist (as if he did not know that ever since the 1960s Sison had always been a faithful follower of Stalin in the old-guard Marxist-Leninist camp).
5. According to a scholar of the October Revolution, "Almost every figure on the Russian political stage wore a costume tailored in Paris." The Bolsheviks thus called themselves or branded each other the Marat, the Robespierre, the Carnot, etc. of the Russian revolution; and the terms "Bonapartist" and "Thermidor" were used polemically in the power struggle between Stalin and Trotsky. Bertram D. Wolfe, *An Ideology in Power: Reflections on the Russian Revolution* (Stein & Day, 1969), pp. 8-9.
6. See Sidney Hook's introduction to Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism* (Schocken paperback edition, 1961), p. viii.