

Questioning Marx, Critiquing Marxism

Reflections on the Ideological Crisis on the Left

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While celebrating the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the ideologues of capitalism cannot gloss over the parallel crisis that is tearing apart the major capitalist societies. They declare Marxism dead, but "the grave-diggers of capitalism" hound them everywhere. For as long as capitalism continues to devastate the lives of the working people Marxism will always be relevant as a method of analysis. Some Marxist parties, however, are making themselves irrelevant by holding fast to outdated doctrines and pursuing political lines that have lost the power to convince.

The crisis of Marxism may serve as the impetus for a Marxist renewal if it jolts these parties out of complacency and forces them to re-examine what they had taken for granted. To turn the crisis into an opportunity they must reaffirm the democratic and humanist values of Marxism, rescue it from the curse of Stalin, and bring it to where Marx stood – on the side of freedom in the struggle for democracy.

This paper grew out of a lecture where I tried to provoke the defenders of the faith with what I thought were outrageously heretical ideas. To my great disappointment, everyone (including the former Communist Party of the Philippines [CPP] Chairman and New People's Army [NPA] commander-in-chief Rodolfo Salas) tacitly agreed even with those points on which I was most uncertain. But some approached me afterwards to express their private thoughts. I benefited immensely from their suggestions. As a result, this paper is substantially different from the one I delivered. Heeding their criticism that I covered too broad a range of issues, I dropped the sections on religion and the class structure to focus on the issue of democracy.

On account of recent developments I should point out that I gave the lecture before the rift in the CPP hit the front pages. None of what I said

then or what I write in this paper should be construed as meddling in their squabble. Being an outsider, the internal problems of the CPP are none of my business. I am only concerned with the larger debate between the socialist and capitalist ideologies.

The Third World Studies Center (which co-sponsored my lecture with the Department of Political Science) expected me to concentrate on the Philippine Left. But I am obliged to devote much space to historical flashbacks to set the most controversial Marxist ideas in their West European, Russian, and Chinese milieu. This also underscores the fact that Marxism is an international and not a distinctly Filipino phenomenon.

Unlocking a Closed System

The method of dialectical reasoning starts from the proposition that everything changes except the necessity for change; and a theory about social change must change with changing times. This applies to Marxism as well. Marxism as we know it today has incorporated the ideas of Marxists after Marx. Lenin updated the analysis of industrial capitalism in *Das Kapital* to contend with the rise of finance capital and the globalization of capitalism. Stalin, Mao, and a host of lesser figures also contributed ideas which were not always consistent with Marx's original formulations and at crucial points departed from the values that inspired his thinking.

The scientific and technological revolution has brought changes in the nature and *modus operandi* of capitalism. But instead of trying to decipher the meaning of these changes and confronting capitalism and what it has become at the end of the 20th century, the benighted bureaucrats in China and the Soviet Union denied that capitalism has changed, thus turning Marxism into a closed system.

This dogmatizing tendency reared its ugly head in the lifetime of Marx. In a letter to Engels in 1858, he deplored the mechanical application of his method to scientific investigation. A dialectical analysis of history, he insisted, requires careful verification of facts and a thorough critique of previous theories. Expressing similar apprehension, Engels wrote to Paul Ernest in 1890 to denounce the habit of twisting facts to support an *a priori* doctrine. Engels reiterated this two months later in a note to Conrad Schmidt:

Our conception of history is above all a guide to study, not a lever for [the reconstruction of reality to fit a predetermined mold] in the manner of the Hegelians. All history must be studied afresh, the conditions of existence of the different social formations must be examined individually before any attempt is made to deduce from them the political, civil-legal, aesthetic, philosophic, religious, etc. notions corresponding to them.

For good reason, Lenin attacked those German Marxists and their Russian followers who sought to strip Marxism of its revolutionary elan to rationalize their own preoccupation with electoral politics. Although he was by now means a dogmatist, Lenin supplied the vocabulary for dogmatization. In branding the parliamentary cretins "revisionists" and "deviationists," he implied that Marxism is impervious to modification. Ironically, Lenin himself was most refreshing when he transcended Marx and, in the spirit of dialectical materialism, revised and deviated from his formulations while reaffirming his basic values.

Filipinos have accumulated a wealth of revolutionary experience dating back to the Katipunan, but Filipino Marxists have contributed little of consequence to revolutionary theory outside the area of military strategy and tactics. They have been too absorbed in day-to-day struggles to bother with the intricacies of theory. What passes for theoretical work consists of decorating pragmatic decisions with appropriate jargon and quotations.

Mao set a fine example by inventing new categories for the class analysis of Chinese society. But Mao Zedong Thought itself was dogmatized during the cultural revolution and it came to the Philippines in this form. The activists of the First Quarter Storm brandished the little red book like a talisman and recited quotations like shamanistic incantations.

Quotation-mongering, flag waving, and fist clenching may have sufficed at the early stage when the basic ideas were just being sowed and the main task was to rouse the enthusiasm of new converts. But these symbolic gestures get stale over time and become counter-productive as the revolutionary process ascends to higher stages, inducing sudden shifts in the adversary's responses.

While theory grows out of practice, practice alone does not advance theory. Theory develops through critical reflections on the meaning and

significance of practical experience. Since social change – the subject matter of Marxism – is an extremely complex process, divergent interpretations inevitably arise. Debates on the meaning and significance of practical experience are therefore indispensable to the life of a revolutionary movement.

Lively debates marked the history of international socialism until the Stalinists, in the name of party discipline, tried to make a virtue out of conformity. This retarded the growth of Marxism in the most politically significant section of the Left. Unaccustomed to civilized discourse, they tend to be unduly acrimonious when debating among themselves. Instead of critiquing the theory upon which a flawed policy is grounded, exponents of contending positions assault each other's honor with unmitigated viciousness.

Scared of being branded "revisionist" or "deviationist," party cadres swallowed every word in the approved texts like little kids memorizing the church doctrines preparatory to their first communion. This form of moral and intellectual terrorism fostered a false sense of solidarity. It stifled creativity and encouraged mindless devotion, making the "true believers" vulnerable to the sophisticated propaganda of conservatism and bourgeois liberalism.

In this period of crisis it is imperative to study the Marxist classics once again and distinguish what is essential to Marxism from the Stalinist and Maoist perversions. Since Marx's, Engels's, and Lenin's work were polemical, one is better able to appreciate their genius by knowing how the recipients of their venom argued their case. Those heretics whom the official communist parties had consigned to the dustbin of history – Kautsky, Plekhanov, Luxemburg, Pannekoek, Korsch, Bukharin, etc. – may have ideas which later events vindicated. Dismissing them without finding out what they stood for is like the behavior of monks in the days of Torquemada.

Proscribing their books has impoverished Marxism. By suppressing dissent, the communist parties diminished the credibility of Marxism as a liberative ideology. This is a historical paradox because Marx and Engels represented the radical wing of the democratic movement. They played active roles in the Chartist movement of England. In Germany *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, a newspaper Marx edited in 1848-49, bitterly opposed press censorship and the arbitrary exercise of state power. Marx

insisted that the struggle for democracy must first be won before there is any chance of gaining socialist reforms. In the 19th century, the communists stood in the forefront of campaigns for universal suffrage whilst the liberal bourgeoisie would restrict political rights to the wealthy.

In the Philippines, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP, the old Communist Party of the Philippines) formed the most aggressive guerilla force against Japanese fascism. In 1972, the CPP mobilized the resistance to martial law. An honest and well rounded study of recent history must not overlook their contributions to the defence of democracy. Nonetheless, the communists ought to ask themselves why, despite their valiant efforts, people still regard them with contempt. To ascribe all this solely to the influence of reactionary propaganda begs the question why the reactionaries have been made more influential.

Can people be blamed for suspecting that communists are motivated by cynical calculations of what would bring them tactical advantages? Their loud and monotonous protestations ring hollow in the absence of inner party democracy. The authoritarian and repressive character of the regimes their comrades established wherever they gained an upperhand reinforced this impression. This stigma they must shake off, otherwise they would remain at the periphery in the continuing struggle for democracy

Dictatorship of the Proletariat

How did Marx and Engels reconcile democracy with the 'dictatorship of the proletariat?' From the dialectical standpoint, this is a non-problem. Democracy and dictatorship are two sides of a coin; they are essential aspects of the state, of any state. For instances, ancient Athens was a democracy only to the male citizens but a dictatorship over slaves, women, and immigrants who comprised the vast majority. So also is capitalist democracy a dictatorship of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat. In this sense, Marx and Engels referred to the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' as a higher form of democracy; a democracy of the majority and a dictatorship over the few.

If what they aim to establish is a democratic system where the proletariat is the hegemonic class, why insist on this ugly word 'dictatorship of the proletariat?' What is so sacred about it? What makes it sinful to use a synonym?

Not many people think along dialectical lines. The belief that democracy and dictatorship are irreconcilable opposites has been drilled into the brains of ordinary Filipinos. The term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' confuses those who assume that dictatorship implies rejection of democracy.

It must be admitted, however, that the stress on dictatorship makes sense in the context of Stalinism, for that is what Stalinism is - a dictatorship of the party in the name of the proletariat. This helps legitimize the denial of democratic rights within the party and in the Stalinist regimes. It must be admitted also that the Stalinist form is part of the larger Marxist tradition, albeit the most embarrassing part.

But do not blame Marx and Engels for the Stalinists. They had a different understanding of the term. For instance, Engels pointed to the Paris Commune of 1871 as the living example of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat.' This reveals another dimension of their politics because the Paris Commune represents the most radical form of democratic governance. It instituted a system of direct people's participation as opposed to the representative system favored by the bourgeoisie. In citing it to illustrate the 'dictatorship of the proletariat,' he projected a conception of democracy which entails the unmediated involvement of the workers in the affairs of state.

By contrast, the representative system in the bourgeois republics restricts working class participation to the act of voting; in the word of Lenin, "to choose once every few years who among the candidates of the exploiting classes are to represent and repress them in parliament." As in the Philippines today, the electorate is but a manipulable mass during elections and a passive spectator in between elections. Policy making in a bourgeois republic is the domain of elective officials, their factotums, and their financiers.

Marxism regards the institutions of a bourgeois state (parliament, for instance) as arenas for the class struggle but looks for other structures (less susceptible to bourgeois manipulation) to serve as organs of people's power. This is why

Marx was enthusiastic about the Paris Commune and Lenin about the Soviets.

'Soviet' is a Russian word for 'council.' In 1917, the revolutionary masses spontaneously created 'soviets' to fill in the vacuum left by Tsarism. All deputies to the Soviets were elected by the workers, peasants, and soldiers on the basis of universal suffrage. Unlike our senators and congressmen, they had no fixed terms; they were subject to recall whenever their constituents lost confidence in them. Moreover, the Soviets wielded power not only in the political sphere but also in the economic. In the economic sphere, they served as organs for workers' control. No equivalent structure in the bourgeois political system could be more democratic.

The Stalinist Perversion

The War of Intervention (1918-21) waged against the young Soviet republic by the US, Britain, France, Japan, etc. in collusion with the local counter-revolutionaries prompted Lenin to disband the All-Russian Congress of Soviets. That emergency measure was analogous to the suspension of elections by Winston Churchill when Britain was under siege. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, however, the dissolution of the original Soviets and their resurrection as rubber-stamp assemblies was a fatal error because it removed a countervailing force to one-man rule.

Lenin also suspended workers' control, the central item in his program of government. Besides the difficulty of instituting such a radical reform in the midst of war, he realized that the barely literate Russian workers were incapable of managing the economy. Under the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP), he invited the professional managers back but only for a limited period stipulated in their contracts. During this period he hoped the working class would gain the necessary knowledge and skills to exercise workers' control. He envisioned a time when the professional managers would become superfluous and workers' control could be put into effect.

Although Stalin fancied himself as the supreme interpreter of Marxism-Leninism, the course he pursued from 1928 onwards rebuffed Lenin's vision of proletarian democracy. In lieu of workers' control, he favored an administrative-command economy where "experts" would manage state enterprises on behalf of the workers. This is the essence of Stalinism which survived the attempts at "de-Stalinization" by Khrushchev and his successors. Let me quote Ralph Miliband's characterization of this model:

Even though Communist regimes [in Eastern Europe and Asia] have differed from each other in various ways, they have all had two overriding characteristics in common: an economy in which the means of economic activity were overwhelmingly under state ownership and control; and a political system in which the Communist Party ..., or rather its leaders, enjoyed a virtual monopoly of power, which was vigilantly defended against any form of dissent by systematic – often savage – repression. The system entailed an extreme inflation of state power and, correspondingly, a stifling of all social forces not controlled by, and subservient to the leadership of the Party/state.

At his deathbed Lenin tried to frustrate Stalin's scheme to institutionalize one-man rule, but it was too late. He was too sick to rally the Party. The instructions he dictated to his wife were intercepted. Stalin went to the extent of threatening Krupskaya that he would proclaim another woman as Lenin's widow.

However, the old Bolsheviks on their own opposed Stalinism after Lenin passed away. But instead of engaging them in a principled debate (the way Lenin handled internal opposition), Stalin unleashed the secret police (LJGPO, later renamed KGB) to silence and eventually execute them in the "Great Purge."

It should be borne in mind that the resistance to Stalinism came from within the Communist Party of the Soviet Union itself. Those who perished in the "Great Purge" were not the precursors of Yeltsin but Lenin's comrades-in-arms who dared to uphold the democratic tradition of Marxism. At the 20th CPSU Congress, Khrushchev pretended to honor these old Bolsheviks with a posthumous rehabilitation, but that did not repair the damage. While repudiating the "cult of personality," Khrushchev preserved the essence of Stalinism. Brezhnev did worse by restoring all its ugliest features and deployed Soviet tanks to save the Stalinist system in Poland. Outside the USSR, communist parties, whether in power or in opposition, paid lip service to inner-party democracy and rallied against the "personality cult" but continued to practice authoritarian leadership.

It was this monstrosity that fell apart in Eastern Europe.

The Vanguard Party

Some early socialists (e.g., Saint-Simon and Fourier) indulged in daydreaming and waited for an enlightened capitalist to fund their dreams, while others (e.g., Babeuf and Blanqui) formed conspiratorial groups to snatch political power by *coup d'état*. Marx repudiated both. His concept of revolution relied on the active participation of the toiling masses. As Bertolt Brecht (the famous Marxist playwright and composer) put it in a song: "The liberation of the working class is the job of the workers alone."

While Marx assigned a vital role to the spontaneous component, he also recognized the need for an organized core (a political party) to stir and steer the spontaneous activities of the proletariat: "Against the collective power of propertied classes, the working class cannot act as a class except by constituting itself into a political party distinct from and opposed to all old parties formed from the propertied classes."

But nowhere did Marx build a systematic theory of the proletarian party. That task had to wait for Lenin. The concept of a vanguard party is one of Lenin's most valuable innovations. In *What Is To Be Done?*, Lenin launched a tirade against those Russian Marxists who called themselves 'Economists.' The latter believed that the proletariat would make a revolution spontaneously, in response to their dire economic situation. The idea of a vanguard was anathema to the 'Economists;' they believed that an organized core would dilute the purity of a proletarian revolution.

Lenin argued that, left to their own devices, the proletariat would only acquire trade union consciousness, not revolutionary consciousness. Revolutionary consciousness has to be "introduced from without." Inculcating it is the principal task of "a party of a new type." But the party would exercise its vanguard role through education, not through manipulation by a network of political officers who receive orders from the party leadership. Only when they are imbued with revolutionary consciousness will the labor movement acquire a dynamic of its own.

What happened to our so-called "EDSA revolution" confirmed Lenin's thesis. In 1986 some of us (myself included) were mesmerized by the dramatic turn of events, giving birth to a tendency of glorifying spontaneity. This is evident in BISIG's programmatic statement, *The Socialist Vision*. As BISIG chairman then, my speeches echoed this naive idea. I toyed around

with the theory that Filipinos are a distinct breed. Whenever we organize anything in a systematic way, we fail; but when each one does his own thing his way, we succeed. I interpreted the snap election campaign and the EDSA uprising as the triumph of spontaneity over vanguardism. BISIG's call for popular assemblies expressed a hope that the spontaneous movement would acquire some loose structure based on the principle of "initiative and self-activity from below."

Critiquing that theory in the light of what happened later, I am now persuaded that a group, no matter how small, can trigger a spontaneous upheaval if it has access to mass media; but without an organized core a spontaneous movement cannot sustain the revolutionary momentum and become a force for structural change. There is need for an organized core with a longer view and a clearer vision. A movement held together by a shallow understanding of the political reality and a nebulous vision of a preferred future will dissipate once the participants perceive their immediate grievances to have been met.

The key question is the relationship between the vanguard and the masses. Let us recall that the spontaneous or unorganized elements at EDSA saw Marcos as the sole problem. Once he was forced out of Malacañang, they believed that all that had to be done was to cleanse the government of Marcos loyalists. The movement thus disintegrated, leaving the future to Cory's retinue of technocrats and spiritual advisers.

Disbelieving in a revolution they did not lead, the Bourbons of the Left committed the opposite mistake of dismissing the popular uprising as the handiwork of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Ramos-Enrile military clique. They declared that Cory was no different from Marcos.

Hence, no effort was made to analyze the change from the Marxist standpoint. This undermined their credibility since only dyed-in-the-wool doctrinaires could believe that nothing had changed or that Cory was Marcos in a yellow skirt.

Lenin once said: "Without a revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement." Assiduous theoretical effort is required to understand the change from Marcos to Cory and revise the line of march. Denying that a change has occurred to justify the old line proved to be a formula for disaster. It goes without saying that theoretical work cannot be

left to the spontaneous movement. A party must undertake it and translate it into meaningful calls for action. The key question, as I said, is how the party should relate to the masses.

Lenin specified the characteristics of such a party. Thinking in the context of Tsarist Russia where super-efficient spies were trained to infiltrate radical groups (including the liberals), he insisted that the party must be organized along conspiratorial lines. Like the secret police itself, it must be compartmentalized and each member trained to maintain utmost secrecy. Like the secret police it should also be hierarchical in structure with a clear chain of command. Furthermore, the party must enforce iron discipline among its members.

This is difficult to implement in the Philippine cultural milieu. A code of silence – what the Russians call *konspiratsiya* and the Mafiosi call *omerta* – is impossible among a people who take rumor-mongering as a favorite sport. Our irrepressible transparency is a weakness from one point of view, but a virtue from another. Our legendary incapacity to keep secrets is probably the best guarantee that no conspiratorial group can stay in power long enough to consolidate a dictatorship.

Lenin's concept of a vanguard party elicited a sharp rebuke from Rosa Luxemburg, a revered figure in the international socialist movement. She warned that a conspiratorial party would eventually substitute itself for the proletariat and the leaders would substitute themselves for the party. This would strangle democracy and the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would end up as a dictatorship of the party over the proletariat.

Lenin replied that the vanguard party would work among the proletariat, not usurp its role as maker of history. He was confident that inner-party democracy would check any authoritarian tendency. Unlike a debating society, however, the minority must submit to the majority, and the lower organs must submit to the higher organs. This principle of "democratic centralism" would combine inner-party democracy with centralized discipline, Lenin thought.

However, the experiences of communist parties all over the world confirmed Luxemburg's worst fears. What is to prevent democratic centralism from degenerating into pure centralism? What is to keep inner-party democracy from degenerating into an empty ritual? What would ensure

that the positions of the minority in the leadership or the ideas of the lower organs are transmitted accurately and fairly if the secretariat enjoys a monopoly over all communication channels? These are unresolved problems in communist parties throughout the world.

With their penchant for over-simplification, the Stalinists claim that the party *ipso facto* represents the proletariat, never mind if there are only a few workers in the ranks. Whatever stand it takes, that is the voice of the proletariat. The party then defends its vanguard role by crushing any Left organization outside its control.

Lack of inner-party democracy has fomented sectarian squabbles and bureaucratized the party even before attaining power. This is also the bane that keeps it out of power. It is significant that, with the exception of Vietnam, none of the successful revolutions since 1949 was led by Stalinist parties. In Cuba, Nicaragua, Algeria, Mozambique, Angola, etc., revolutions were led by non-communist revolutionaries (Fidel Castro embraced communism when he was already in power). Learning from this experience, the Partido Comunista Salvadoreño and the South African Communist Party had the good sense of submerging themselves into broader organizations and refrained from claiming any special status.

A revolutionary party cannot be taken seriously as a democratic force unless it practices democracy within. A party of the Stalinist type, despotic and bigoted, is absolutely without moral ground to denounce the repressiveness of the bourgeois state. The experience of communist parties in Eastern Europe has shown that Stalinist style of leadership attracts only the careerists and the mindless herd who must have leaders to tell them how to think and what to do. Those with minds of their own – as revolutionaries typically do – eventually get disenchanted.

Pluralism or One-Party Rule

The aim of every political party – leftist, centrist, or rightist – is to capture the commanding heights of government and the economy. It strives to fill all positions of authority with persons committed to its program. The Marxist party is no different. Another issue is the relationship between the party in power and the parties in opposition.

In the Stalinist model, the party constitutes itself into a ruling clique with absolute monopoly of power in the state and civil society. This accounts for the Communist Party's totalitarian image. The events in Eastern Europe bared the fragility of a political system built on this model. Party monopoly of power has a way of corrupting and alienating it from the populace.

While professing to be a Stalinist, Mao prescribed an antidote for Stalinism: to sustain the revolutionary momentum, the Marxists should wage a continuing revolution by constantly mobilizing the masses against "persons in (party and government) authority taking the capitalist road." The slogan of the cultural revolution — "Bombard the Headquarters" — would be denounced by Deng Xiaoping as anti-party. Indeed it was aimed at the party bureaucracy that Deng and Liu Shaoqi personified.

Nowhere in the works of Marx and Engels can we find an ideological support for one-party rule. Neither was this part of Lenin's program. After the October Revolution, he even invited the Menshevik and Social Revolutionary parties to join a coalition government. One-party state was a necessity imposed on the Bolsheviks by the other parties themselves. Instead of responding to Lenin's call for a coalition government or playing the role of legal opposition in the socialist political system, they chose to go underground and, backed by foreign powers, launched a civil war.

There is some truth to G. K. Chesterton's dictum that "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Information that surfaced in the trial of the "Gang of Four" and during the glasnost period in the Soviet Union revealed the extent of corruption in the ruling communist parties. Party bureaucrats endowed themselves with enormous privileges while their peoples lacked the basic necessities of life. This nurtured complacency and lack of inertia, and led to their ultimate isolation.

As vanguard, the party should, when the situation requires, mobilize the masses to check the abuses of persons in authority; in Sandinista language, to "govern from below." Just as the bourgeoisie wield power without themselves entering the public service, the working class can exercise hegemony by exerting constant pressure on the socialist government. As the proletariat advances to higher levels of consciousness and skills, government authority should dwindle accordingly. The state may never "wither away" as Marx and Engels thought, but its coercive authority can be

replaced with social authority. Only in this context is it possible for freedom to flourish among the “wretched of the earth.”

Pluralism is a bourgeois liberal doctrine that ought to be preserved and enriched in the socialist revolution. It is not incompatible with socialism. The tension that arises through political competition would serve as a constant reminder that the party must earn the allegiance of the masses. Of course, no state would tolerate an opposition party that resorts to violent methods and solicits support from foreign powers. But this should never be an excuse for suppressing any opposition.

Forms of Struggle

Mao’s dictum that “political power grows out of the barrel of the gun” states in colorful language what all political scientists take for granted. Politics, whether conventional or revolutionary, deals with the question of power. Authority is nothing but legitimized power; behind every law is a threat of punitive action; and the state is a source of legitimate violence.

What makes a revolution is not the amount of blood spilled in the transfer of power but its social consequences. More people die in Philippine elections than those who perished in the 1917 revolution in Russia. What was bloody in Russia was not the revolution itself but the defense of the revolution against the white armies and the foreign interventionists.

The necessity of violence has been a perennial issue among Marxists. As in other issues, Marxism gives no straightforward answer. It all depends on the concrete situation. While recognizing the necessity of armed struggle under repressive conditions, Marx never said that armed struggle is the only way, or that it is the highest form of struggle to which all others must be subordinated. In an address to the First International Congress at The Hague, he allowed for the possibility of peaceful revolution occurring in the US, Britain, and Holland. The American socialist Eugene Debs expressed this attitude which Marx shared: “Peacefully if we can, violently if we must.”

It was utterly ridiculous of the PKP to advocate parliamentary struggle after Marcos had disbanded Congress. When the dictatorship collapsed, however, new possibilities emerged for other forms of struggle. But the CPP hardliners go to the other extreme of refusing to recognize these possibilities

or take a cynical stance, insisting that the democratic space is an illusion. The Mendiola massacre lent credibility to this, but the CPP ought to carefully assess whether the masses think likewise, lest it run the risk of being isolated.

Another variable that ought to be considered is the international milieu. What are the prospects of people's war now that the Soviet Union no longer exists and China has lost interest in revolutionary movements overseas. True, the NPA has demonstrated its capacity to survive without external assistance. But the question must be asked: Perchance it wins, can a communist regime that seized power through armed struggle withstand a US-backed counter-revolution without the deterrent power of the Soviet Union?

The Partido Demokratikong Sosyalista ng Pilipinas (PDSP) and Marxist groups that opted for non-violent strategies weaken their position by equating open political struggle with participation in electoral contests. As a strategic line, this is even more hopeless than people's war. Do they truly believe that a party seeking genuine social reforms can gain control of government under the present electoral system? Yes, they ought to participate in elections, but they should have no illusion of achieving social reforms through a corrupt electoral process where guns, goons, and gold are decisive.

At this stage the top priority in the political struggle ought to be a campaign for electoral reforms. The issue of a parliamentary versus a presidential system is secondary. Primary is the issue of proportional representation (the party list being a refinement of this) versus representation per district. The present system of representation perpetuates the *status quo* because the *trapos* (traditional politicians) are more able to utilize the lingering feudal attitudes to entrench themselves in most districts in the country.

Principled program-oriented parties have no chance in this system. Until it is changed (if ever), the Left ought to pursue pressure politics as the main form of struggle. As the most ideologically advanced component of the Left, Filipino Marxists should develop the theory of pressure politics; this is potentially one area where they can make a truly original contribution.

While they are unlikely to gain a decisive role in government through elections, they should seek to “rule from below”: to block anti-people legislation and policies and press for genuine social reforms. Just as the bourgeoisie are able to wield power while refraining from public office, the Left need not pack the government with its cadres to protect and promote the people’s interests.

The chances of persuading an elite-dominated and ideologically conservative constituent assembly to adopt the party list system is next to nil. The best hope for electoral reform rests on the current peace process. Unfortunately none of the armed groups with whom the government is negotiating seem to appreciate the need for proportional representation. Left groups that wish to play the electoral game should therefore try to persuade the National Democratic Front (NDF), the Rebolusyonaryong Alyansang Makabayan (RAM), and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to take up this project.

A political settlement of the armed conflict need not appear as a defeat for the rebels if the latter are able to extract substantive concessions. Were it not for their demonstrated military strength, the conservatives in government would never listen to them. If they can force them to listen now and heed the clamor for electoral reforms, that would be a great victory for the armed struggle.

Inadvertently perhaps, Lenin encouraged adventurism – what he himself branded as “an infantile disorder” – by defining the objective of revolution as nothing less than smashing the existing state machine. Those who take his words as dogma are wont to compromise – something he himself thought necessary under some circumstances – and fight for reforms that would open up political space for the development of working class hegemony. This all or nothing attitude is a debilitating form of dogmatism.

Private Property and Centralized Planning

The abolition of private ownership is believed to be essential to Marxism. This is wrong. For Marx, the goal is social ownership of the instruments of social production — not all instruments of production, but only the instruments of *social* production, meaning the tools which require collective labor power. These, rather than private property in general, are

the source of exploitation, the mechanism for extraction of surplus value. Private ownership of sari-sari stores, fishing boats, food stalls, and small factories may exist side by side with state industries, banks, transport systems, and public utilities.

Moreover, Marx did not equate social ownership with state ownership. He recognized the cooperatives as a structure for social ownership. And nowhere did he say that centralized planning is essential to socialism.

I make these clarifications as a theoretical background to the current controversy on the economic reforms in China, Vietnam, and the Soviet Union before Yeltsin. When Stalin forcibly collectivized agriculture, he encountered stiff opposition within the Communist Party because there was no consensus among Soviet Marxists for the total elimination of private ownership. Deng Xiaopeng and Gorbachev could not be justly charged of betrayal for restoring private ownership of small enterprises and farms. (I am worried, however, about Deng's policy of inviting foreign multinationals to invest in key sectors of the Chinese economy.)

Centralized planning should be re-examined in the historical perspective. Let us not forget that in the 1930s it was hailed even by Fabians like Beatrice and Sidney Webb as the paragon of efficiency and economy. Through centralized planning Stalin lifted Russia out of backwardness. Until 1928 Soviet Russia was "the basket case of Europe." Ten years after 1929 (the year centralized long-term planning began) it became a leading industrial power; another ten years later it became the second nuclear power. In 1960 the Soviet Union scared the wits out of the United States by sending the first rocket into space, thus demonstrating its technological superiority. That rate of industrial development at such a grand scale has been unmatched anywhere in the capitalist orbit.

Centralized planning was effective at the early stages of industrialization. At a later stage, it became a brake to further growth: inefficient and wasteful. Soviet economic development ground to a halt in the early 1980s, providing the rationale for *perestroika*.

Perestroika in the Soviet Union, "four modernizations" in China, and a similar program in Vietnam would institute the market mechanism in the framework of a socialist economy. Is this a fundamental departure from Marxism? Marx, it is true, denounced the market mechanism but he was

thinking of the capitalist market. He assumed that the actors in the market were big private enterprises. He said nothing about a socialist market economy.

Gorbachev's ill-fated reforms and the ongoing reforms in China and Vietnam aim to establish market relations among state enterprises. Instead of the Stalinist system wherein the central planning commission (GOSPLAN) assigned production quotas and evaluated the performance of state enterprises by the speed at which they met their quotas, the enterprises would now be judged by their capacity to sell whatever they produce. With this goes the devolution of decision-making to the individual enterprises. If a plant is producing too much of something it cannot sell, it is authorized to shift to another line or develop other lines. There is nothing wrong with this from the Marxist standpoint. It is a more rational method of economic management, especially when the economy has crossed a certain threshold of development.

What Marx would have found obnoxious is the overwhelming power of the technocracy in management. Lenin, as noted earlier, considered workers control to be an essential task of the socialist revolution. He suspended it during the NEP period, but only as a temporary expedient. It was Stalin who elevated it into a dogma. The conditions of the Soviet workers, in whose behalf the communist party supposedly governed, grew worse because Stalin also snuffed the life out of the trade unions and other people's organizations. They were turned into docile structures for giving a semblance of popular support for the policies of the state and party bureaucrats.

Khrushchev tried to de-Stalinize, only to find himself cast into the political garbage can by the party bureaucrats who opposed any change. Learning from his mistake, Gorbachev breathed new life to the people's organizations and mobilized them against the bureaucracy. This was the essence of *glasnost*. It created a democratic space for people's organizations.

But the Soviet masses, cynical about the Party and swayed by Western consumerist advertisements, availed of the space to dismantle socialism itself. This is not sufficient reason for declaring socialist democracy an impossible dream. The lesson that can be drawn from the Soviet experience is that socialism should keep democracy alive so that people

may articulate their grievances and aspirations and the government may respond before it is too late.

Conclusions

Democracy” is the most abused word in the political vocabulary. It has been used to justify repression and elite rule. Lately, however, the narrow bourgeois definition that limits democracy to formal procedures for electing officials is being broadened in the usage of the popular movement. In the years to come the ideological struggle will revolve around the conflict between two notions of democracy: elite rule and people’s power.

A striking feature of the contemporary political scene is the widespread cynicism towards government. Hardly anyone trusts the government. “Privatization” is the latest buzz word among technocrats and politicians, implying that even those at the helm regard it as inherently inefficient and corrupt. The masses, too, see the government as an oppressor. This has stimulated the proliferation of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs). The NGOs and private corporations are taking over the traditional functions of the state. In a paper for a conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia in 1989,¹ described this trend as “the withering away of the state” and “the revenge of civil society.”

The NGOs on their own cannot be the building blocks for a new democracy. They play a democratizing role only to the extent that they are able to heighten the consciousness of the people and help organize a militant grassroots movement. Partly through their efforts, there has emerged in the Philippines a multitude of politically-conscious sectoral and community organizations. These people’s organizations (POs) rather than the NGOs, are the building blocks for a new democracy. As the most ideologically advanced contingent of the Left, the Marxists should think of how to vitalize these people’s organizations.

The capitalist concept of democracy does not extend to the workplace. In the bourgeois republics the dictatorial aspect of the state is subdued in the political sphere; it is transparent in the workplace. Marxism should renew its campaign for democratization of the workplace, where most people spend a greater part of their active life.

With their wealth of experience in grassroots organizing, Filipino Marxists are in a good position to elaborate a concept of democracy based on people's power. This requires not only the relentless exposure of the authoritarian dimension of capitalist democracy but also the projection of a democratic platform where popular assemblies, rather than the *trapo*-dominated Congress and the profit-oriented mass media, are the chief fiscalizers and sources of initiative.

So far, however, the Philippine Left has confined itself to the worn-out slogan "Expose and Oppose State Repression." This is important but inadequate. What the country needs is a system of governance that allows maximum participation of the militant citizenry. The POs are potential organs of democratic power analogous to the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Soviets of 1917, and the Turin Factory Councils of the early 1920s. Much has been written on the first two, but little is known of the factory councils. They deserve closer study as an alternative to the Stalinist system of centralized control.

The Dutch geographer Anton Pannekoek and the Italian Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci were the most ardent advocates of "council communism." The latter distinguished the factory council from the trade unions that are essentially bureaucratic structures dedicated to enlarging their members' share in the fruits of capitalist production. The factory councils by contrast are aimed at enhancing workers' participation in management. Whereas the trade unions would defend the lazy and incompetent, the factory councils cared about technological innovations and productivity. Gramsci saw them as the embryo of a proletarian state nurtured in the womb of capitalism. For him, proletarian power – or "hegemony" – should be developed here and now, not after a successful revolution.

This nurturing of proletarian power entails first of all the democratization of the revolutionary movement itself. A vanguard that tries to manipulate the people's organizations through a network of cadres who take orders from the party leadership perpetuates the culture of servility instead of preparing the proletariat to assume the initiative and participate as a conscious force in shaping the nation's destiny.

A rigidly negative outlook which opposes any attempt to develop the economy and interprets each political event as the handiwork of the CIA is

counter-productive in the long run. Cynicism is often mistaken as a revolutionary attitude. In fact, it is insidiously conservative. Like the orthodox religions which Marx called “the opium of the people,” it saps the people’s faith in themselves.

Moreover, a rigidly negative outlook discourages the workers from understanding the complex production process and learning the art of organization and management. In the early years of the Soviet Union, this laid a monumental roadblock to socialist construction. As noted earlier, Lenin could not put workers’ control into effect because the Russian proletariat and the Bolshevik party were totally unprepared for the task of economic management.

The Chinese revolution of 1949 was less chaotic because more than a decade before they successfully drove Chiang Kai-shek out of the mainland, the communists had set up a parallel government in Yen-an. In that liberated area they experimented with techniques of socialist management and trained a corps of administrative cadres. They were better prepared than the Bolsheviks to assume the functions of government. Of course, the Yen-an model cannot be replicated in an archipelagic nation like the Philippines; and being intrinsically bureaucratic, it is not congenial to democratic principles. Filipino Marxists have to think of how to develop the workers’ capability to control and direct the management of enterprises through the people’s organizations.

These are tentative thoughts, not firm conclusions. I present them to invite thought and discussion about a socialist program for the Philippines; a collective search for an egalitarian alternative to capitalism and a democratic alternative to Stalinism, bearing in mind the painful lessons from the regimes that crumbled in Eastern Europe. ❁