

Marxist-Leninist Study

HOW SOCIAL CHANGE COMES ABOUT

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EVEN SOMEONE WHO knows very little about history knows that it does not stand still. There are periods in the history of social development which give the appearance of being static, eternal and unalterable. Yet to the surprise of the blind or those who do not want to see there is a sudden break with the past and a new and higher form of social organisation arises.

Different people explain these changes in different ways. Some say it is God. Others say it is the creation of the individual genius who has awoken people from their slumber. Still others attribute it to some spontaneous accidental event which has nothing to do with the past. The people who look for this type of explanation are either the victims or the tools of those who have some special interest to sow confusion about the true process of change in history.

Some may well ask the question: 'What has all this got to do with our struggle against imperialism, colonialism and oppression? Let the theoreticians and the intellectuals spend their leisure hours debating the reason for and the mechanism of social change. We have a job to do—a true theory of history may be important for the degree-hunting student but how on earth is it connected with the struggle against Verwoerd and the building of a decent healthy society in South Africa?'

Such a view is not only shortsighted, it gives the enemy all the advantage he requires in the battle for the minds of the masses of the people.

What greater demoralisation can be created amongst oppressed people than to plant in their minds the belief that their misery is God-created and for ever unchangeable. The well-known biblical cliché that the poor will always be with us is not just an expression of resignation. It is an indispensable weapon in the hands of a small

minority who would be deprived of their privileges if the poor were not with us.

The whole state propaganda machine in South Africa is mobilised to capture the minds of the people for servility. The notorious Bantu Education Act is just one example of this.

Although ideas, as we shall see later, have their roots in the material life around us, it is in this very field of ideas that the important battles begin. This is a self-evident fact. That is why education and agitation to offset the influence of reactionary ideas and to illuminate the minds of the people on the way forward, is an indispensable activity of the true scientific revolutionary.

LIGHTING THE WAY

A true understanding of the processes of history not only serves to eradicate backward beliefs which are obstacles in the struggle. It illuminates the road to the future. It transfers political leadership from the field of pure emotion and anarchism and places it where it belongs—in the field of scientific leadership based on understanding and knowledge. It enables one to understand what sort of social change is feasible in any given situation and which groups in society are to be relied upon to effect such change. It enables one to judge political groups and individuals not by what they say about themselves but by reference to their overall historical function and direction. It enables one to judge the wisdom of each act in the struggle not by reference to some blind emotion or intuition but by the scientific standard of whether such act is consistent with the ultimate objective and accords with the realities of life.

Without a profound grasp of all the essentials of the scientific approach to history, the political leader will sway with the wind; will lose faith in the possibility of ultimate victory and will fall prey to ideas and courses of conduct which hamper rather than advance the struggle. Let us take a few examples from the rich experience of the South African Communist Party.

The South African liberation movement has often been faced with the problem of defining its attitude towards dummy institutions such as Bungas, Advisory Boards and similar bodies. The politician who bases his attitude on the simple emotional foundation of hatred for all white men's dummy institutions will continue to shout 'boycott' irrespective of the real needs of the movement. He will often go further and hurl abuse at the Communists who in one situation may advocate boycott and in another attempt to make use of some of these institutions to advance the people's struggle. He will say the Communists are inconsistent. But are they? Surely the only true scientific test of political

consistency is whether a given tactic advances or retards the people's struggle. In one situation a call for a boycott becomes a most important basis for the progress of the liberation struggle. In another situation it can serve to hold back the full possibilities of advance.

He who shouts boycott irrespective of place, time and situation is really the inconsistent one. He would have you believe that revolutions are made by emotional phrase-mongering. What consistency is there in the parrot-like cries for the continuation of a policy which may be right for one situation but extremely dangerous in another? He who does this is certainly consistent with himself but not with the scientific principles of political leadership. He lacks the understanding of the processes of history and thus of the political tactics which effect advances. The fact that such a person may be right in one situation is merely a matter of accident. By and large, historical advance does not, as our school teachers would have us believe, consist of a collection of accidents. Hatred of oppressive institutions is of course the very starting point of political action. But it is not enough to hate. The emotion must, by knowledge and understanding, be transformed into an effective tool for putting an end to oppression and all its institutions. Here, in this small field of the tactic of the boycott, you can already see the contrast between the scientific political leader and the ill-equipped pseudo-revolutionary.

The point becomes even more important in relation to the assessment of the present strength of the Verwoerd regime and the possibilities of an advance towards a state of true national democracy. Those not equipped with a knowledge and understanding of the historical process will present a case, which for them is formidable, that there appears to be no hope for change. The South African regime is extremely powerful and well armed. The people are without the material resources to challenge it. The economy is stable and prosperous even though its benefits go to the minority white group. It has powerful friends outside South Africa.

Yet the Communist Party says:

'... inside South Africa itself—in spite of the massive-appearing and ever-growing state machine of domination and repression—the balance of forces is steadily changing in favour of the people and their liberation forces, and against the oppressing minority.'

(The Revolutionary Way Out—a Statement of the Central Committee published in THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST, Vol. 2, No. 3).

Is it because Communists are more optimistic than others by nature? Certainly not. This assessment is based on the application of the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism which tells us that to examine any situation as if

it were in a state of isolation and complete repose, is to examine it on historically false premises.

This is not the place to set out all the factors which explain why in the face of an unprecedented military and security build-up and a reign of terror against the forces of national liberation, some of the most militant and effective counter blows have been struck and why the basis is being laid for raising the struggle to still higher levels.

A failure to grasp the dynamic laws of movement of society has in many cases given rise to defeatism and disillusionment which in turn leads to unnecessary compromise and dragging in the tail of the people's struggle. On the reverse side of the coin it leads to adventurism and criminal recklessness of the Leballo type. The moderate and the adventurer both suffer from the same disease. Their reactions are determined not by the overall scientific analysis of the forces of change in a continuous state of movement but by sudden rushes of blood to the head or butterflies to the stomach.

BASIC LAWS

Of course the scientific theory of Marxism-Leninism does not pretend to supply a ready-made formula for the solution of every problem. Nor does it pretend to forecast in every detail the future course of events. However, on the basis of a study of history it provides the only correct framework in which the serious revolutionary can approach the problem of leading his people against all forms of oppression. It proclaims the universal truth of certain basic laws of social development and demonstrates that without knowledge of these laws the road to the future is dulled with fog. Marxists do not claim to be infallible prophets nor do they ignore the possibility of the accident, the unforeseen or the effect of good or bad leadership.

We have all heard of a number of well-known natural laws such as the law of gravity. If any person attempted to conduct himself in such a way as if the law of gravity did not exist we would all think he was a lunatic. The law of gravity operates, as you know, quite independently of our will and our intention and hence we cannot will or pray it out of existence. We are compelled, unless our intention is to commit suicide, to live our lives with this universal objective reality.

In the same way, if there are universal laws of social development which operate independently of our will, we cannot close our eyes to them but must operate within their framework. If the programme and policy we adopt does not take these historical truths into account, then however sincere or hardworking we might be, the effort will be wasted and may even have the effect of putting the struggle back. Let us illustrate this proposition by an example.

You will see later that it is one of the fundamental laws of social development that there is a continuous movement from lower to higher levels of production and that where at a given stage the social system (or more correctly the relations of production) becomes an obstacle to the growth of the productive forces, the social system is swept away and replaced by another which enables the process to be continued. Yet there have been people in history and there are still a few today who would have us ignore this basic law.

When modern machinery was introduced its initial effect was to create greater misery for the working class by causing unemployment with all its resultant evils. 'Destroy the machines!' was the cry of a few who were incapable of understanding the true cause of the misery and the inevitable course which history takes. Although a few machines were actually destroyed such an approach was doomed to failure as an overall solution to the problems confronting the working class under capitalism. The brave bands of workers who responded to such a call were of course showing an inspiring militancy based on the urgent need to act in order to do away with the miseries of capitalism. But to be sincere and militant is not enough. Had they understood that to prevent the means of production from developing was as impossible a task as the attempt by Canute to stop the sea by verbal commands, their efforts would have been better directed.

The modern counterparts of the machine breakers are still to be found in many parts of the world. The cry of back to the spinning wheel or back to the primitive glory of tribal society may be a means of expressing disgust at the suffering caused by capitalist relations of production but it has in the past failed to stop the process of history and will fail to do so in the future. Why?

The unchangeable law of economic growth cannot be propagandised out of existence. It operates whether we like it or not and the political leader who closes his eyes to it will be swept away.

SCIENCE AND HISTORY

At this point the reader may be puzzled by a very important question. He will be only too ready to admit that there are certain laws of nature which assert themselves whether we desire it or not. However much we think, pray or act we will not stop the sun from rising tomorrow morning or the apple from reaching the ground when it falls from the tree. But the laws of history, you might puzzle, can surely not operate in the same way. History is made by men with wills and passions. They act on ideas formulated in the human brain. They are not machines driven by some outside power to do things and to bring about changes in accordance with some law of social development of which they may

be completely ignorant. Since the rising of the sun has no connection whatsoever with our wills, our actions and our thinking, it is easy to understand why the event will occur irrespective of man's action. But our wills, our thinking and our actions are the very stuff from which history is made.

How can it therefore be said that whether we like it or not a certain course of events is inevitable?

To understand the answer to this question we must examine in some detail the Marxist view of history which is generally known as the materialist conception of history or historical materialism.

A simple clue to the understanding of one of the most important propositions of historical materialism is contained in the well-known working class song which paraphrases a portion of the speech which Friedrich Engels delivered at the graveside of Karl Marx:

'As man is only human he must eat before he can think.
Fine words are only empty air and not his meat or drink.'

No one can deny that before human beings can engage in any other activity they have to provide for the basic things which make life possible—food, clothing and shelter. Man, because of his relative physical weakness and his relative advanced mental capabilities, is at the same time both compelled and peculiarly suited to associate himself with other men for the purpose of conquering the natural forces which threaten his existence and utilising them for the purpose of a never-ending advance of his physical and intellectual needs.

This he achieves by associating with his fellow men to produce and exchange the things required for the sustenance of life. The production of these things is the very basis of every social order. And the way men associate together at any given time to produce them, characterises and describes the social system.

RELATIONS OF PRODUCTION

History has seen the growth and development of a number of social systems. Each differs from the other because of the way in which men have associated themselves for this purpose. These relations of production constitute the very foundation of the social order and the pursuit of other social interests is directly linked with the type of production relations which exist at the time.

Men do not enter into a specific type of relations of production as a result of some formal conscious decision. They do so because, in a sense, they are forced by the objective conditions of material life. As Engels stated,

'the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced . . . is the basis of every social order.'

In every society that has appeared in history, the distribution of the products and with it the division of society into classes, is determined by what is produced and how it is produced and how the produce is exchanged.' (Socialism, Utopian and Scientific).

In the early stages of man's history he associated together with others on the basis of equality both in the field of a contribution towards the productive machine and in sharing its products. The cultural, spiritual and other social institutions which this type of society developed were, in many respects, from a moral point of view, far in advance of the standards which have become entrenched in capitalist society. These have elevated exploitation, inequality, greed and selfishness to the level of a state religion. A superficial analysis of these facts has misled many people. In our last issue we dealt with an argument advanced by Mr. Tom Mboya, which relied in part on the superior moral qualities of primitive, tribal institutions.

Primitive communism (as this early social system is known) together with all its social institutions, did not operate because of the superior moral character of early man. It was a social system which reflected the very low level of productive capacity. Private ownership of the means of production as we know it today and the exploitation of man by man did not exist. The laws and other social institutions reflected this objective reality. Although the precise form of institutions differed, communities between whom there could have been little or no contact, by and large, developed similar institutions at points where the level of productive capacity coincided. If we reject the supernatural explanation, we must come to the conclusion that these institutions had their roots in the material conditions of life in existence at the time. The modern capitalist theoretician would have been laughed out of existence had he in such circumstances advocated the creation of a competitive economic society based on private property.

It is impossible to live off the labour of another man when the level of production is such that he can barely produce enough to support himself let alone another. And because men produced communally the result of their effort was shared equally. In such a society co-operation on the basis of equality is not inspired by superior ethical concepts. It is a necessity imposed by the primitive nature of the tools at the disposal of men. The necessities of society give birth to its morals.

As time passed men developed their tools and improved their productive techniques. From hunting tribes they settled down and became agricultural communities. Instead of the whole community being engaged in one or two major economic activities, a division of labour made possible by the development of the means of production arises. It is only at this stage of economic growth that one sees the

development of private property and the division of society into classes—those who own the means of production and those who work for them.

The precise direction which society then takes may differ from place to place depending upon many factors peculiar to the people and its past history. But the essential features remain the same. Private property and its protection by the property-owning class become the basis of the society. Inevitable antagonisms arise between the dispossessed and those who own the means to control their life and to exploit them. The struggle between these classes becomes the basic and fundamental motive force of history.

NEW IDEAS

Not only is there an economic transformation in the relations of production but with it new ideas and institutions grow or are developed. Voluntary loyalty to the community is replaced by an enforced loyalty to the small group of exploiters. Private ownership of the means of production and its protection become the basis of all religious and other ethical systems. New ideas based on greed, selfishness and avarice replace the old noble concepts of communal living and pulling together for the good of all. Has the devil entered man? No. The law of social development is asserting itself. The new concepts and institutions inevitably begin to reflect the needs of the new economic system.

The system of slavery was the first economic form of exploitation of man by man which gradually replaced primitive communism in most part of the world where economic growth had made its establishment possible. Society was divided up into two main classes, the slave-owners and the slaves. The slaves, consisting in the main of masses of people conquered by wars or captured by other violent means, became the property of the slave owner. The master appropriated to himself the whole product of the slave's labour and the slave received in return the barest minimum required to keep him alive and working.

The appropriation of the fruit of another man's labour was only made possible because he could produce a surplus. Previously, the communal effort was hardly efficient enough to produce sufficient to satisfy the minimum requirements of the producers.

In time a new form of exploitation, feudalism, replaced slavery and became the predominant feature of the social and economic system in many parts of the world. Under feudalism the worker was not completely owned by his master. By law or by necessity the serf was tied down to the land owned by the feudal lord. Unlike slavery, the whole product of his labour did not belong to his master. Usually the serf was obliged to work portion of his time or portion of his land for himself and the

rest for his master. Again the social, cultural and other institutions came to reflect this new form of exploitation.

Feudalism as an economic system did not come into being as a result of a deliberate decision by mankind. The old slave relationships began to be undermined because the inevitable drive to greater productivity was being hampered by the form of exploitation under slavery. Improved productive techniques were not easily usable by slave labour. Dissatisfaction leading to many heroic slave revolts played an important role in the break-up of this system.

CAPITALISM

Capitalism is the last social system between primitive communism and socialism which operates on the basis of exploitation of man by man.

As was the case with previous basic changes of social structure, it did not come about as a result of the deliberate decision by mankind to introduce it.

The old feudal relations of production were good enough for a certain period in history. But gradually as a result of economic developments within feudal society, the old relations of production became more and more a drag on further potential economic advance. In particular, the feudal relations which tied the mass of the working population to the land and which, compared with slavery, resulted in a flourishing of production, now started acting as a brake. Thus, with the development of the productive forces, the law of history again asserted itself. The old relations of production were smashed and replaced by the social system of capitalism.

Under capitalism the worker is separated completely from the means of production and exists by the sale of the only thing he possesses—his labour power. He is free to move and to sell his labour power to the highest bidder.

The form of exploitation has altered but its essence has remained the same. It was very easy to understand that under feudalism the feudal lord was enriched by living directly off the surplus products appropriated from the labour of others. The introduction of the wage system tends to blur the fact that from this point of view the capitalist does precisely the same.

With the political victory of capitalism made inevitable by the development of the productive forces, there arose again a new cultural and social superstructure. The concept of "liberty, equality and fraternity" could not have inspired so many people to action unless the material basis for its spread was in existence. Whatever the motives were of the well-known philosophers who made this concept popular,

it was the ideological weapon for the smashing of feudalism and its replacement by a new form of exploitation.

THE NEXT STEP

The workers were freed from the feudal type of bondage to be faced with a new oppressor. The victory of the capitalist class in various countries gave an unprecedented spurt to the development of man's productive forces. Petty individual production was replaced by the powers of social labour in which men co-operate together in great productive enterprises using power-driven machinery. This social production is capable of immense achievement but the private appropriation of the product under capitalism in which social production is made to serve private profit hampers the fuller use and development of the forces of production for the benefit of mankind. Thus again there is a lack of harmony between the relations of production and the further development of the productive forces. The law of history must assert itself. Indeed, for a third of humanity it already has in the form of the socialist system which makes possible miracles of expansion and production. For the first time since primitive communism the exploitation of man by man has been abolished and the stage is being set for the building of communism. The establishment of the socialist economic system was made possible only by the tremendous advances which mankind had made in the economic field. It is no historical accident that Marx and Engels discovered the theory of socialism at the time when they did. The new economic changes that had come about presented humanity with new tasks and it is only in such a situation that theories which lead people to action are developed. (A more detailed analysis of capitalism and socialism will be made in a future instalment).

At each stage of history men set themselves aims which have their roots in the real possibilities around them. The social institutions and political ideas which appear to be the moving forces of history are merely mirrors of the material world. It is true that these ideas develop a momentum of their own and in turn affect the precise nature and timing of historical events. But this ought not to blind us to the fact that

'men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please. They do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.'
(Marx—The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte).

Once we understand this, we are no longer tossed about in a sea of historical uncertainty. The goals we set ourselves are based on the scientific understanding of the process of change.

Our ignorance of the laws of change will not in the long run prevent them from asserting themselves. But once we understand them the process becomes speedier and less painful. The scientific application of these laws becomes a tool for the building of the future. That is why the Marxist view of history is not just an academic explanation of the world. It is an indispensable weapon for changing it.