

Socialist aspirations and socialist realities

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The topic for this session - "Socialist realities and socialist aspirations" implies that there is a gap between the two. Before reflecting on this gap, let me make a confession in response to some pessimistic remarks made in the course of these proceedings. I confess that I remain an unrehabilitated utopian. I believe (not in the religious sense, although I use religious symbolism) that the human soul is quite capable of achieving a form of society in which one person does not live off the labour of another. And that, in one simple sentence, is socialism, the lodestar of all radicals, both before and after Marx, which I am convinced will ultimately be reached.

Of course to reach it will require more than theoretical discourses; the main vehicle will be organisation and struggle by the wretched of this earth. And we should remember that the wretched of this earth constitute 90%, if not more, of humanity who live either in capitalist or capitalist orientated socio-economic formations. For them, if socialism is not the answer, there is no answer at all. And that's not the way humanity works; in the end it moves inexorably towards an answer.

The gap between socialist realities and socialist aspirations has been, and continues to be sufficiently documented. The primary questions which remain (and which are very much interrelated) are, what created the gap and is it possible to bridge it?

This is an edited version of two interventions made by Joe Slovo while attending an international socialist seminar organised by Monthly Review in New York, October 1990

In other words was the socialist promise false from the start or was it merely unfulfilled?

I believe the promise was not false from the start. It was unfulfilled. And it should be emphasised that even within the deformed socialist societies there were achievements which signalled the great potential of socialism. Scores of millions were inspired and dedicated in their attempts to build socialism on the ground. There were heroic moments when they fought tenaciously to defend what they considered to be the realism of some of its achievements and of its promise. They would not have done so if their only experience of it had been total and unmitigated failure. But, on balance, a failure it was. And, demonstrably, it has either collapsed or faces grave crises. Why this has come about is the question we will undoubtedly debate for decades to come.

We should dismiss the external conspiracy theory as the sole explanation. External intervention undoubtedly helped the process of collapse along, but it was not the main culprit. At the end of the day we are left with one of two answers. If what hap-

pened had to happen because of an irreparable fault in the essence of Marxist thought and its socialist objectives then that's it; for the moment it may be "the end of history". If however, the essence of Marxism with its aspiration towards a socialist order remains valid (which, I suspect, most of us here believe to be so) then to enable us to return to history, we need to uncover what it is that went wrong.

In general, the fundamental failure is the divide between socialism and democracy both within the Party and within society, leading to a gross form of socialist alienation of the producer from all levels of the socio-economic formation. How did this come about? The debate has only just begun. My own experience in this debate is that almost before the ink is dry nagging doubts creep in both about what one has said and about the silences. I plead guilty to a number of quite loud silences in my earlier intervention in "Has socialism failed?". Let me touch briefly on some of these silences.

In the first place there is a silence which correctly looms large in Pallo Jordan's critique of my intervention (*South African Labour Bulletin*, no3 1990, p66), in which he says that I "identified the symptoms of the illness but not its basic causes".¹

It is obviously not enough to describe the Stalinist distortions and the effects.² In the interests of future revolutionary practice we need to identify both the origins of Stalinism and the social and economic context in which it was reproduced. These two questions are connected but are, at the same time, distinct. Marx's famous dictum from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, will help us reflect on them:

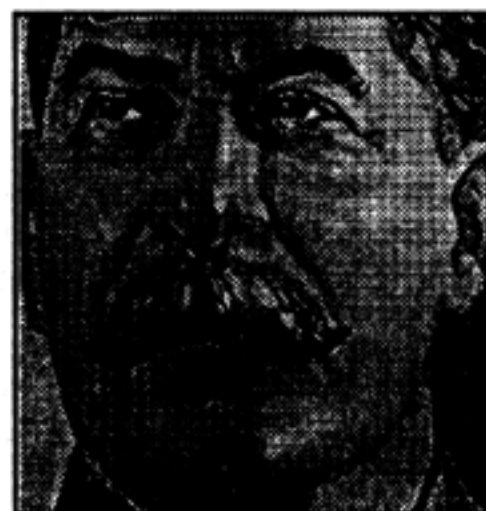
"Men (and no doubt women too - JS) make their own history. But they do not make it just as they please; they do not

make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past", with the *economic circumstances playing an ultimately decisive role*.

Clearly, the *reproduction* of Stalinism in actually existing socialism had a significant portion of its roots in the emergence of a strata with an *economic interest* to achieve and maintain a dominant and privileged position; a point which should have found a place in my earlier intervention.³ But as a total explanation, this simplified form of economic determinism has its limits. It throws little light on the origins of Stalinism and even less light on the remedy.

For example an explanation of Stalinism which *restricts* itself to class reductionism immediately poses the following problem:

Socialism, by definition, is not an egalitarian society. Economic reward is determined by **contribution** rather than by need. This implies economic differentials



STALIN: Inevitable?

and, therefore, the existence within a socialist order of economically privileged layers, including a state bureaucracy. A vulgar determinist application of Marxism would ground a conclusion that there was a degree of inevitability for the emergence of Stalinism as a system designed to reproduce and increase the economic differentials of socialist society. But this is clearly a faulty argument.

I agree with Pallo Jordan that what happened in the Soviet Union was not inevitable, that "Soviet leadership faced a range

of alternatives at all the crucial points in its history", and that its actual choices (influenced by a combination of objective and subjective factors) influenced the course of the whole socialist project.

It is clear that some of the roots of Stalinism as a policy option became embedded prior to the emergence of a ruling strata which later used it to protect, expand and reproduce its economic privileges at the expense of its own workers constituency. In other words, *the foundation for the institutionalised separation of socialism and democracy, both in the Party and in society, was laid in ideological practices which preceded the emergence of an economically privileged strata.* It certainly cannot be access to power or economic privilege which explains the fact that outside the Soviet Union tens of millions of communists including our own South African Party embraced Stalinism, not merely in the sense of blind Soviet Union worship, but also in their internal political practices and forms of organisation.⁴

Quite a few of the outstanding leaders of the Bolshevik revolution (including Trotsky, Bukharin, Kamenev and Radek) who came to be "oppositionists" to Stalinism, not only played a significant role in erecting part of its theoretical edifice, but also encouraged some of its practices before Stalin was in the saddle and long before the emergence of an economically privileged strata. This, of course, did not happen in an intellectual vacuum and cannot be explained by purely subjective factors. Many undemocratic practices are unavoidable during periods of illegality and during exceptional periods of counter-revolutionary chaos. But exceptions too often became the rule instead of merely proving it. The danger began when, in the words of Rosa Luxemburg: "they make a

virtue of necessity and want to freeze into a complete theoretical system all the tactics forced upon them by... fatal circumstances, and want to recommend them to the international proletariat as a model of socialist tactics" (*The Russian Revolution*, p78).

Among the "oppositionists" who poured a great deal of concrete into the foundations of Stalinism was Leon Trotsky. Isaac Deutscher's biography documents Trotsky's contribution to transforming the trade unions into little more than state apparatuses. In his book *Terrorism and Communism*, published in 1920, Trotsky's thesis on the "corruption of the masses" by the previous system led him to a concept which substituted a Party dictatorship for a class dictatorship. It also advocated "the militarisation of labour" and insisted that "the dictatorship of the Soviets became possible only by means of the dictatorship of the Party". He maintained that it would be making a "fetish of democratic principles" if there was an insistence on "the workers right to elect representatives above the Party" (Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, p508). Even as late as 1937 Trotsky justified the Stalinist policy of subordinating the Soviets politically to the Party (*Trotsky, Stalinism and Bolshevism*, p22). I believe we should exercise some caution before accepting comrade Pallo Jordan's rather sweeping judgement that we must turn to the works of "oppositionists" (including Trotsky) to discover the true meaning of the communist vision (*SALB*, no3 1990, p74). We should certainly study their works, but we are likely, in the case of some of them, to discover quite a few ideological positions which also degrade the ideas of communism.

The subjective and "voluntarist" roots of Stalinism are, of course, only part of the picture. But their importance for the integ-

urity of socialist political organisation is fundamental. It is absolutely vital to create mechanisms which will effectively institutionalise inner Party democracy and prevent the emergence of all powerful cult figures or a small leadership collective which exercises a dictatorship over the Party.

At the level of the state (leaving aside periods of counter-revolutionary chaos) it is the elected representatives of the people that must have full power to rule, and not a Party which proclaims itself as the vanguard of all society by law. Had this been the case in the countries of existing socialism, the tendencies towards the reproduction and institutionalisation of bureaucratic and economic privilege could have been inhibited and, in time, eliminated with the construction of an economic base which would eventually make possible economic egalitarianism.

Another silence in my earlier intervention relates to the place of Leninism in the body of Marxist learning. I believe that a sizeable portion of the diet of so-called Leninism on which we were all nourished, is really repackaged Stalinism. Much of it was Stalinism in search of legitimation. Moments of specific revolutionary practice which were presented as universal and timeless maxims of Marxism served to rationalise undemocratic methods both within the Party and in society.

The paraphernalia of undemocratic practices, which may have been unavoidable during exceptional periods, became codified as a model for a Leninist Party throughout the world. *What is to be Done?*, Lenin's great work written in 1902, became our organisational bible. The concept of the Party set out in *What is to be Done?* is wholly inappropriate and inapplicable in conditions of legality and even more so

when power is achieved. Is there, on reflection, anything more unreal for the real world, than the elevation of this brilliant work by Lenin (which catered for the building of an illegal or semi-legal Party in Czarist conditions) into the kind of catechism it became for most of us?

Another aspect presented as a permanent feature of Leninism is the Stalinist version of the vanguard Party, essentially devoid of real democratic content both in relation to inner party functioning and in relation to society. It is a concept and a practice which emerged during periods of illegality and found further expression during the moments of revolutionary upheaval and counter-revolutionary assault. I have no quarrel with the thesis that, in the latter conditions, complete democracy is not always practical. But under the guise of universal Leninism, the lack of democracy was given a permanent place in socialist civil society.

The same could be said of the concept of the single party state. This concept has virtually no pedigree or even mention in the classics of Marxism.

It reflects a very special moment in a very special country's history. But it too was turned into a universal Leninist prescription. Henceforth, it was no longer relevant whether or not the Party had the support of society or even of the class it claimed to represent. Its monopoly of leadership is guaranteed by law and not by political support. No-one is allowed to question its mandate and, eventually, the same applied to the membership in relation to the leadership. All this is in the name of Leninism! And it became a short run from the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the notion which was its substantial application in practice - the dictatorship over the proletariat which, without exception, joined

in the popular upsurge in all the countries of Eastern Europe.

We also need to open up discussion on the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat (DOP) and its place in the context of longer term socialist aspirations. There are two ways of posing the question. In my earlier contribution (*Has Socialism Failed?*) I made the point that: "the term 'dictatorship of the proletariat' reflected the historical truth that in class divided social formations state power is ultimately exercised by, and in the interests of the class which owns and controls the means of production. It is in this sense that capitalist formations were described as a 'dictatorship of the bourgeoisie' whose rule would be replaced by a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' during the socialist transition period. In the latter case power would, however, be exercised in the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people and should lead to an ever expanding genuine democracy - both political and economic. On reflection, the choice of the word 'dictatorship' to describe this type of society certainly opens the way to ambiguities and distortions."

Apart from the way the term came to be abused and progressively denuded of its intrinsic democratic content, it is questionable whether the concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat ever had validity in the context of longer term socialist aspirations. Can we equate the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie (in itself a much oversimplified concept in some Marxist works) with what is claimed to be its legitimate Leninist converse for civil society - the dictatorship of the proletariat? Leaving aside unique moments of revolutionary chaos, the socialist project when in power should surely exercise such power in the interests of the whole of society, a claim

which constitutes the essence of *The Communist Manifesto*.

It is therefore both false and harmful to elevate what can, at most, be a transient necessity in unique circumstances into a universal and permanent prescription for socialist government.

The programmatic adoption of the concept of the DOP by virtually all communist parties had its starting point at the 1902 congress of the RSDLP on the initiative of Plekhanov. It was soon radically adjusted to reflect the realities of the struggle against Czarism; the immediate Bolshevik objective moved from the DOP to the **"revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the working class and peasantry"**.

One thing is clear, with the defeat of the intervention, victory in the civil war and the neutralisation of the economic dominance of the exploiting classes, the concept of the DOP lost whatever disputed validity it might have had. Its perpetuation provided a "Leninist" mantle under which Stalinism was able to flourish. The external threat with its internal agents, both real and invented, provided the rationalisation for the thesis that the stronger socialism grew the more intense the class struggle became. The external threat from imperialism and fascism was certainly real, but the vast chasm between socialism and democracy made the whole system more, and not less, vulnerable to these threats.

The post-1985 attempts to combat Stalinism and to repair the damage it wrought to the whole fabric of existing socialism have, by no means, yet assured the survival of the system even in the Soviet Union. The Gorbachev revolution, whose main thrust of perestroika and glasnost provides a basis for a renovated democratic socialism, is going through uncertain times.

In retrospect, it is easier to appreciate

the gargantuan scale of the dilemma which has faced the post-1985 anti-stalinist reformers. The party bureaucracy was so pervasive and dominant at all levels that society could not be democratised without first democratising the Party itself. At the same time Stalinism had so congealed the life of the Party that it could not itself be democratised without pressures which would come from a democratised civil society. Perhaps the serious blockages in the attempted Gorbachevian revolution can be partially attributed to the fact that the efforts to begin the democratisation of the Party lagged too far behind the processes that were unleashed in society as a whole.

Enough has been said about the failure of both capitalism and socialism in the North. What about the prospects for socialism in the overwhelmingly peasant, underdeveloped South, i.e. the colonial and formerly colonial world in which various modes of production - pre-capitalist and capitalist - co-exist? This question was first posed at the 1921 2nd Congress of the Comintern and led to a vigorous debate between Lenin and the Indian communist leader Roy. It was generally agreed that these countries lacked an adequate economic and class foundation for an advance towards socialism. Was it possible, in such circumstances, to by-pass capitalism and to advance the slogan of Soviet power? The answer given by the Congress was a qualified yes. It was possible, said the Congress, to skip the capitalist phase if the socialist world came to the aid of the underdeveloped world with "all the resources at their disposal". And it was believed that workers' power would very soon be victorious in most of advanced capitalist Europe.

As it turned out, the Soviet Union - with a most backward economic legacy - was to stand alone until post-1945 when socialist

power expanded in countries most of which had underdeveloped economies with capitalism still in its formative stages. The expanded socialist sector proved quite incapable of devoting significant economic resources to help the socialist oriented forces in the newly-independent underdeveloped countries. The latter were virtually complete hostages to the capitalist-controlled raw material and financial world markets. In the economic sense, it was a misnomer to talk of the "world socialist system".

The few countries in Africa which adopted a socialist perspective had neither an economic foundation which could support an immediate advance towards socialism nor a working class strong enough to sustain it politically. In retrospect it is clear that, in such circumstances, and in the absence of a world socialist economy into which they could integrate, the projection of an immediate socialist perspective was premature.

The transformation of liberation movements such as FRELIMO and MPLA into "Marxist-Leninist vanguards" often undermined their popular base. Slogans about a socialist path had little meaning for the bulk of the people who were overwhelmingly peasant. Indeed, some of the premature leaps into collective and state forms of production in the countryside resulted in a serious deterioration of living standards. We should not, of course, underestimate the havoc caused by externally-supported banditry in some of these countries. But, here again, the popular and multi-class social base needed to effectively counter such subversion was unduly narrowed by premature "socialist" economic measures and an unjustified assault on deeply-felt cultural and religious traditions.

It is not being suggested that there is

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only place for a Marxist organisation when the socialist project is immediately on the agenda. Indeed, in our own South African conditions our Party has been, and continues to be, an indispensable instrument of working class aspirations even though the immediate content of the struggle is national democratic rather than socialist in character. We support the inter-class liberation alliance, headed by the ANC. We work to safeguard the role and interests of the working class both as part of this alliance and as an independent social force.

We accept the reality and necessity that our post-apartheid economy will be a mixed economy.

We, however, make no secret of our Party's objective to ensure that the mix has an increasingly socialist orientation. Nor do we hide our commitment to work as speedily as possible for the creation of political and economic conditions in which

an advance towards socialism will be possible. We see this as a process and not as something that can be conjured up out of revolutionary-sounding clichés and slogans.

I have alluded briefly to our own experience in order to emphasise the point that the art of revolutionary marxist leadership is not confined to the time when socialism becomes an immediately realisable objective.

The interests of an existing or developing working class may, in given conditions, be better served, and the future of socialism be more assured, by a policy which attempts to remove the obstacles towards socialism rather than one that pretends that they do not exist. In Africa most of the attempts to pole-vault into socialism, ignoring unavoidable interim phases, not only proved a failure but also tarnished the vision of true socialism in the eyes of many ordinary people. ★

REFERENCES

1. In mitigation, but not justification, my pamphlet was an extremely hurried intervention in the midst of the Eastern European uprisings, in response to pressure from our Party ranks to provide a launching pad for further debate. My mind was focussed less on identifying the roots of Stalinism and almost exclusively on the need to engage in ideological battle with those who still defended Stalinism, or questioned its existence.

2. I use the term "Stalinism" to denote the bureaucratic authoritarian style of leadership (of parties both in and out of power) which denuded the Party and the practice of socialism of most of its democratic content and concentrated power in the hands of a tiny, self-perpetuating elite. Thus "Stalinism" was not invented by Stalin; it was used and perfected by him to destroy democratic opposition both inside and outside the Party, and to entrench privilege, economic and social, accruing to the Party and state bureaucracy and related layers of society.

3. I use the formulation "strata" to avoid entering the debate on whether it constituted a class, a neo-class, a bureaucratic bourgeoisie, or whatever.

4. I am truly astonished by Pallo Jordan's misreading of aspects of my contribution despite his claim to have "read and re-read comrade Slovo's pamphlet". A case in point is his remarks that "one cannot accept at face value comrade Joe Slovo's claims that the SACP has always been non-Stalinist" (p.74). I made no such claim; I suggest he re-reads once again my page 24 in which I not only stress our own share of responsibility for the spread of Stalinism but also say:

"It would, of course, be naive to imagine that a movement can, at a stroke, shed all the mental baggage it has carried from the past. And our 7th Congress emphasised the need for on-going vigilance. It noted some isolated reversions to the past, including attempts to engage in intrigue and factional activity in fraternal organisations, sectarian attitudes towards some non-party colleagues, and sloganised dismissals of views which do not completely accord with ours.

"The implications for socialism of the Stalinist distortions have not yet been evenly understood throughout our ranks. We need to continue to search for a better balance between advancing party policy as a collective and the toleration of on-going debate and even constructive dissent." (p24)