

A Debate

Simon Pirani & Cyril Smith

This edited correspondence between two comrades who have participated actively in the International Socialist Forum will hopefully highlight some of the issues that have come up at the forum. The first letter was sent by Simon Pirani to Cyril Smith in April 1996, after the publication of Smith's book Marx At The Millenium. The second is Smith's response.

[part of a letter from Simon to Cyril, April 1996]

Now to the main point - comments on Marx At The Millenium.

I thought Chapter 3 was excellent, a real development, a real clarification. Your insistence that the essential question is "what do humans have to do to live humanly? ... how can humanity make itself what it is in essence" (p.63) etc, is cause for thought. We will no doubt disagree on the answer to this question, but it is really a question without which other questions do not make sense. I think we began to touch on these issues in the post-1985 discussions, and I would imagine that part of the present problem of the WRP is that these matters have been forgotten by some comrades.

I have spent time thinking about - what is a "principled" way to live in the 1990s? This was never a problem in the 70s, when we believed that revolution was imminent. But now I think I will have to live under capitalism for some time, the question is, how? In 1985 much was said about the "wrong" answer, which we had given to this question, which was: spend your life selling papers and organising YS meetings. But what was right? It seems to me that many comrades have sunk into a relatively quiet existence, unable to see quite what to do. Also NB the end of Harry Ratner's book, which (30 years after the event) said that he left politics because he couldn't hack doing it full-time the Healy way - the implication being that there was no other way. I was very sad to read that.

Incidentally. In 1987, you wrote in Workers Press, with reference to Healy's sexual abuse and to the "Torrance machine", about the reproduction inside the party ("second time as farce") of the most depraved relations in capitalism. This is surely part of your argument and could have been included in the book?

Back to the text. The material on humanity being trapped inside an inhuman shell (capital, the state, etc) is good. Likewise on the relationship of the individual to society, etc.

I am not sure how all this relates to what I say below, but I

think it revolves around what I think is your wrong approach to history. I think you apply a normative standard to the "Marxists", instead of investigating and criticising their activity as Marx would have done.

I strongly disagree (as you know from our discussions) with what you say in Chapter 2, especially about the Russian revolution. Here are some points:

1. Re. the last three paragraphs (p.165): you say the Russian revolution was a "detour", a "cul de sac". This is the heart of what is wrong. It suggests that we tried that way, it was no good, now we have to look for another; when you advise against "bemoaning the time that we lost", the implication is that it WAS "lost", but that there is no point in crying over spilt milk. Wrong. The Russian revolution CHANGED the world and compelled people to change the way they thought about the world. It posed problems of understanding that Marx did not and could not have dealt with. Those who today think Lenin or even Trotsky answered all the problems posed by the Russian revolution are promoting a monstrous deception - but the job is to continue the work that they DID start, not to keep telling everybody that Marx did not mean things to be as they were. Of course he didn't.

This is not a semantic discussion. It is a central point. You once said to me (in a letter, I think) "Lenin was too busy making a revolution to develop Marxist theory" or something like that. I replied, and I still think I was right, that by making a revolution he DID develop Marx's work.

2. The Russian revolution changed life. It compelled tremendous changes in thought. Thought could NOT be the same afterwards. If this was not THE way to take Marx's work forward, what was? You compliment Lenin and Trotsky on their ability to break with orthodoxy (p.62). But was not the fact that they argued for a workers' revolution in 1917 the substance of their break from orthodoxy? If the work done around the call for "all power to the soviets" was not THE answer to Kautsky and Plekhanov, what was? You avoid this question, mixing it up with the issue of "vanguard parties" and people making revolutions "for the workers". It is absolutely clearly documented (I can draw up a book list for you) that the October revolution was an act by the majority of urban workers, supported to one degree or another and in one manner or another by vast sections (we can't say "majority", you can't quantify a whirlwind like that) of the peasantry. Leaving aside the issue of "vanguard party" for consideration below, and acknowledging that this was a WORKERS' revolution, surely we must then con-

cede that that act was NOT a "cul de sac" but a continuation of what was started by the Paris commune.

3. You make much of the fact that Marx never used the term "workers' state", that his conception of "dictatorship of the proletariat" was something quite different, etc. But because you limit yourself to a simple comparison, showing that his ideas and the reality of 1917 were different, your argument flops.

"The 'dictatorship of the proletariat' had been transformed into a kind of spiritual force directed by the party and its leadership, independently of the will or knowledge of the human beings actually struggling to live in those terrible days" - p.29. I do not understand this business about "spiritual force". Circumstances dictated that the first task of the proletarian dictatorship as envisaged by Marx - the violent suppression of the bourgeoisie - could only be begun in 1918-1919 in the form of a war waged by a regular army (something Marx certainly didn't believe in, and nor did anyone in the Second International for that matter). This regular army was put at the centre. The strength of the self-governing workers' organisations was sapped (not least, by Lenin's decree of 1918 abolishing workers' control) until they virtually disappeared. (You know all this, don't you?) But where was the "kind of spiritual force"?

The Bolshevik leaders constantly referred to their rule as a type of "dictatorship of the proletariat". That they were aware of its contradictions is demonstrated, for a start, in the quotations you yourself repeat from the trade union discussion. You have contrasted the conception Marx had with the reality as it appeared in 1920. But that is easy, and useless. I could do better - I could compare passages from "State & Revolution" to the reality in 1920 and show how unlike they were. Your remark (p.159) that Lenin "glimpsed [the nature of the state] after the collapse of the Second International - and then forgot about it" is an evasion. What actually happened was that, having taken power by virtue of a workers' revolution, Lenin and co. found themselves stuck at the head of a "bourgeois state without a bourgeoisie" (also Lenin's formulation).

You say; "behind the thinking of the Bolsheviks stood notions of the state and of the party which blocked the path to any understanding of what was happening" (p.27). I don't think so. Lenin's insights on this question, which Trotsky tried to develop in *Revolution Betrayed*, OPENED the path to an understanding. I don't say more than "opened the path", I don't say they provided all the answers ... but "blocked the path"? No. What is remarkable is the frankness with which they tried to get to grips with these matters while fighting a civil war with the other hand.

You quote from *Terrorism and Communism* and complain that in the 30s Trotsky gave no "warning signs". But of what should such a warning sign consist? I would say, an explanation of the concrete circumstances under which this work was written. But you are in a poor position to criticise Trotsky for neglecting to place these things in their circum-

stances, because that is precisely what you fail to do.

The essence of Bolshevik policy in 1920 was an extreme (one might even use the word fanatical) optimism in the rapid spread of the revolution, and the conviction that by defeating the Whites and hanging on to power, the road would be opened to rapidly solving the problems that had cursed them in 1918 and 1919. What happened? Bloody, brutal, widespread peasant revolts; workers' protests; the disastrous failure of the invasion of Poland. The result was NEP. Again, Lenin was remarkably conscious of what was going on (see the remark quoted by Victor Serge - and, I understand, by Jacques Sadoul - to the effect that the Bolsheviks were going to damn well make Thermidor themselves, and not end up getting guillotined as the Jacobins had).

When you ask the question "what happened after this [trade union] dispute" (p.32) you don't try to answer it concretely by discussing NEP, you just rush on. Some young communists, hearing news of the NEP, despaired of "living humanly" and committed suicide. We have to deal with these concrete realities, because they were the result of superhuman efforts precisely to "live humanly" made by that generation. If you wanted to say that, confronted with a new phenomenon that their generation had created, many of them too easily lapsed into using words like "workers' state", "dictatorship", "the iron laws of history" etc, many of them did not listen carefully enough to that discussion between Bukharin and Lenin or contribute to it, many of them fought on without deepening their understanding of what was happening, then I might agree with you. But that is NOT what you say. You only tell us that they said different things from Marx, and you slur THIS together with the complete perversion of Marx's ideas which, although it may have started with Zinoviev and Bukharin and co, only assumed the form in which we recognise it today under Stalin. This was a whole process, and it needs following carefully (like Marx followed the political economists), but you bundle it all together as "Marxism" and put up a sign saying "cul de sac". Is this how to educate the next generation?

Far from "blocking the road to understanding", the Bolshevism of 1919-1920, super-optimistic as it was, unleashed a torrent of intellectual energy. At that point, when the state machine was becoming more and more centralised, and the economy was collapsing faster and faster, inspired discussion about how to "live humanly" was developing. NB the work of Kollontai, of Lunacharsky's commissariat of the enlightenment, discussions on religion and law, discussions among artists, etc etc. The Comintern was built.

Much of this was more or less lost shortly afterwards. But you appear to suggest that since it all goes under the heading of "Marxism" it is not worthy of study.

3. Trotsky was not ready in the 1930s to say everything that he might have thought about 1920. But he did write *Revolution Betrayed*. You quote (p.25) the first paragraph of "Stalinism and Bolshevism", and you say "defence of

an established set of ideas ... proved to be quite inadequate". But *Revolution Betrayed* (not to mention writings on fascism, art, Spain, philosophy, etc) clearly DID go beyond the defence of established ideas. It did attempt to say what a workers' state, or a degenerated workers' state, was or was not. It did not take these things for granted. I would be the last to suggest that this was the final word on the subject, or that it was sufficient, or that the Trotskyists do not bear a grave responsibility for failing to take this discussion an inch forward for many years. They do bear such a responsibility. In developing this discussion, it is ESSENTIAL to go back to Marx, to see what he DID say about the Paris commune, to see what he did NOT say about a workers' state etc. But that can not be the end of the matter.

For example, you have yet to convince me that the fact that Marx never used the phrase "workers' state" was any more significant than the fact he never used the word "computer", i.e., in both cases, he never saw one.

Your reader is left with NO idea of what YOU think existed in Russia in 1917-1921. You have not shown me that the formulations mentioned above, by Lenin, and what Trotsky had to say in *Revolution Betrayed*, did not OPEN THE WAY to understanding this. There is a SEPARATE discussion about how the phrase "workers' state" became MISused, which is surely part of the discussion about how the word communism (which certainly was Marx's word) became misused. But you slur the two together.

4. You say, Luxemburg went further than Kautsky against Bernstein but "nowhere did she approach the philosophical basis of the problem" (p.36); Lenin "never published a word which challenged [Kautsky's and Plekhanov's] PHILOSOPHICAL outlooks" (p.47); the Trotskyists "never had the theoretical resources to penetrate to its [Stalinism's] philosophical core. The best that they could do was to show [that Stalin's policy was contrary to Lenin's]" (p.25). I do not think that the "basis" of reformism, or the "core" of Stalinism, were philosophical. Surely the "core" of reformism and Stalinism is that they represented, and represent still, the pressure of capital on the workers' movement and (forgive me for using the term, and tell me what else to call it) the workers' state. Surely Lenin, Luxemburg and co saw it as their task to inflict defeats on reformism in the realm of practice, as did Trotsky in fighting Stalinism.

I am NOT saying that the fight against reformism and Stalinism does not have to be carried on in the sphere of philosophy; especially the corrupting influence of Stalinism on all that goes under the heading of Marxism does need to be unpicked, examined, superceded, etc. That is perhaps the most important task NOW. But to "live humanly" in the period straight after the first world war meant to participate in the Russian revolution. Didn't it? You seem to suggest otherwise, that if the revolutionaries of that time had concentrated on rediscovering the "philosophical core" of Marx's work, in order to expose the "philosophical core" of reformism and Stalinism, their time

would have been better spent.

Of course the point is not to say what they should have done. But what should we do? I do not think a search for Stalinism's "philosophical core" is the issue. Stalinism as an ideological corruption and Stalinism as a material force which did imperialism's dirty work (up to and including Cambodia) must surely be taken in the context of all the questions you raise in Chapter 5 about the 21st century.

5. Party/class. In conclusion, you say: "Marx never belonged to a 'Marxist party' or anything like it" (p.164). On *What Is To Be Done*, you say: "Nothing like this is to be found in the writings of Marx or Engels. All their lives, they fought against those who built sects which aimed to show the world what it should be like" (p.37). You are evading issues.

The Bolshevik party was clearly NOT "a sect". Many many subsequent parties claiming to be Bolshevik may have been, but IT was not. Furthermore, when Lenin talked about bringing socialist consciousness into the workers' movement from without, let us separate out the history of how those words were interpreted later by sects, Stalinists and others ... and recall that this was Lenin's description of Marx and Engels' own activity. I do not see why you get so worked up and excited about it. Marx did try to bring a "socialist consciousness" into the workers' movement, first through the Communist League, then through his connections with the First International, through his correspondence with German and French social democrats. You refer to his dislike of many of the German and French leaders - but what were his disputes with them about? Is it really so unreasonable to describe these as attempts to "divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie"? Marx quite clearly DID believe the workers' movement was under such pressure, and all the derogatory things he said about the British "aristocracy of labour" bear this out.

I am NOT saying there is NO discussion to be had about the way that Russian conspiratorial traditions were reflected in Lenin's party. I am NOT saying there is no discussion to be had about the way that *What Is To Be Done* was, at a later point in history, used as the justification for building sects. But again you slur things together. This is NOT the same as the question about whether there is any need for socialists to consciously bring their ideas to bear on the workers' movement. In the first paragraph of page 106, you yourself clearly imply that they do need to do so. This, to my mind, was the starting point of what Lenin was trying to do. Yes, in his party he had a fair share of conspiratorially-minded daredevils who had little to do with "living humanly"; J. Stalin is probably the example whose psychology we all know best. But instead of working through this history to show in what sense there was a development of Marx's work and in what sense there was a negation of it, you lump all these things together.

6. A very good (or rather, bad) example of the muddle - in Chapter 3. "Ideas about 'bringing socialist consciousness into the working class from outside', 'vanguard leadership' etc, were the result [of not thinking hard enough about the Theses on Feuerbach]. We surely know today, and should have known before, that nobody can be forced to be free ... Moreover, how are those who 'bring' the 'correct' consciousness to the masses supposed to have got hold of it themselves" (p.72-73).

You clearly imply here that people who talk about working-class vanguards end up by "forcing people to be free" in some Orwellian nightmare. In a world where 90 per cent of books on the subject directly attribute responsibility for Stalinism to Leninism, this is just not good enough. Similarly, you declare: "It is easy to see what is NOT to be done. There have been too many attempts at 'social engineering' - people who know what is good for us trying to impose answers on us" (p.153). One hears this sort of statement at least once a week from some reactionary Russian politician, or American academic, with reference to the Russian revolution. And in a book where you talk about the Russian revolution at length, your reader will assume you are joining in the chorus. Why put yourself in this position? Do you think you are in a vacuum where there are no Russian politicians or American academics? I am afraid that you are not.

7. Marx and the Russians. I do not understand your point. Marx liked the narodniks just as he liked the Fenians - because he had a revolutionary soul. And so? He made some dismissive remarks about the Geneva group - but as you point out, he didn't know much about who they were. For somebody who gives Lenin a very hard time for not going deeper in his struggle to transcend Plekhanov, you will yourself have to offer us more than this.

Incidentally, the picture is incomplete without some mention of Chernyshevsky and how his work related to that of Marx.

There are other things I would like to say about Chapter 4. I hope you go further against "AI" and sociobiology; what you have written is a good start. I do not agree with the point you make about "theory"; you seem to ignore the fact that many many Marxists use the word in a much wider, and a much more sophisticated sense, than the very narrow sense which you specify for it.

All the best,

Simon.

27 February, 1998

Dear Simon,

When you wrote me that letter from Petrozavodsk, getting on for two years ago, I'm afraid I just couldn't be bothered to answer. The gulf between us seemed unbridgeable. This was wrong of me. So when we had that exchange at the International Socialist Forum meeting recently, I realised that I ought to make amends. It is clear that the issues are still not resolved, although, perhaps we might have grown up enough now to begin to tackle them. After all, it is only twelve-and-a-half years since the Healy explosion illuminated all of our experience in that group, and only now are we beginning to be able to grasp some of the implications of our chief discovery at that time: the struggle for communism has itself to be communist.

Let's begin with your suggestion that I regard the new ground broken by the Bolsheviks in 1917-21 as "not worthy of study". There, you are certainly quite wrong. However, what I do think is that, in order to carry out this important study, we must separate two aspects of "Marxism". On the one hand, we have the history of centuries of working class struggle, which was taken to new levels, first by Marx, and then by the experiences of the Revolution and the Civil War. On the other hand, there is the body of ideas elaborated by the Marxists in the course of their efforts to comprehend that history.

Our argument, which has gone on for a long time, always seems to go like this. I say: "Lenin's Materialism and Empirio-Criticism is a rotten book" and you declare: "the call for 'all power to the soviets' was ... THE answer to Kautsky and Plekhanov". I attack the formulations of What is to be done? and you tell me that the Bolsheviks were not a sect. I say: "The concept 'workers' state' contradicts Marx's notion of the communist revolution" and you answer: "Lenin's insights on this question, which Trotsky tried to develop in Revolution Betrayed, OPENED the path to an understanding". Obviously, we are not talking about the same things.

Yes, of course the October Revolution was not a coup. It was a massive action by an important section of the international proletariat, and a huge social upheaval. Certainly, the Bolshevik Party of 1917 was not a sect, but a powerful organisation of workers. Yes, Lenin and Trotsky did break with the politics of the Second International. But you insist that "the job is to continue the work that [Lenin and Trotsky] DID start". I am arguing that the theoretical categories with which "Marxism" tried to understand the twentieth century were (a) not those of Karl Marx and (b) false. What we mustn't do is just "continue" in the same theoretical direction. For people like us, who have spent decades fighting for precisely those ideas, this change of direction is very hard. We have to retrace our steps, recognising that we were stuck in a theoretical cul-de-sac.

Then, critically and openly, we can re-examine the entire body of doctrine. Otherwise there can be no regeneration of revolutionary socialism.

Of course we have to study the history of October and of the Communist International with great care. This is both to uphold the aims of the struggle they embodied, and to investigate where their understanding of that struggle was wrong. The break from the orthodoxy of the Second International in 1914-19 was only partial. The early Congresses of the CI laid down a body of analysis which broke politically with Kautsky and Plekhanov. But underlying it was an outlook, and especially a picture of the relation between Party, State and class, derived largely from that same Kautsky and Plekhanov. Of course our hatred of Stalinism is not primarily about philosophy. But our fight to free ourselves from its influence - and in 1985 we found that influence went much deeper than we had suspected! - must include penetrating to its philosophical core.

Look again at those twin notions: workers' state and democratic centralist party. Not only have these ideas no place in the work of Marx. They are directly opposed to his contention that the proletariat is the subject of history. Marx found that the way to transcend capital, state, family, law, etc., did not lie in anybody's programme, nor in any organisation, nor in any theory, but in the ability of the proletariat to form itself into a subject.

"Marxism" - and especially "Marxism-Leninism" - sometimes paid lip-service to the idea that the proletariat was the subjective factor, but actually we saw the Party and the Workers' State as the "subjective factor". This was fundamental to the thinking of the Third International and was taken over into the Fourth. Look again at a work like *Their Morals and Ours*, and see how Trotsky bases his conception of morality on the Party, not on the proletariat. It was the Party which was the decisive factor in modern history, we all believed.

This was in contrast with the idea of Marx, who grasped, in opposition to all previous and subsequent socialism, that the communists have to become "the mouthpiece" of a "real movement". This movement within the working class expressed the essence of the struggle of that class for its humanity, and thus the meaning of capital itself, for labour was the subjective side of the antagonism within capital. Any other way of seeing the world seeks to make socialism into the imposition of a new form on reality, in theory and in practice. (In opposition to Istvan, but in line with KM, I don't want to talk about socialism as a new social formation, or a new mode of production; it is a removal of obstacles to truly human life, rather than the construction of something else.)

The emancipation of the proletariat is the work of the proletariat itself. Anything in Marxist theory or practice which is not permeated with this idea must be combated, and that includes the idea of "bringing consciousness from without". Communism was not a "doctrine", but "the

movement of the immense majority". There is no going beyond capital without "communist consciousness" and "the alteration of men", both "on a mass scale". And that means a self-alteration. What the Third Thesis on Feuerbach calls "revolutionising practice" refers, not to the activity of a "vanguard" armed with a "correct" programme, but to "the coincidence" of the changing of circumstances and human activity or self-change".

You make some kind noises about my assertion that Marx's question concerned "living humanly". But the basic conception of Bolshevism, which made the Party and the Workers' State into subjects, transformed this into a dream of the future, and thus a state of affairs which contradicts the struggle to attain it. If "revolutionising practice" is not already "living humanly", it is a lie. We tried to fight for the liberation of humanity, while ourselves living with the mentality of Party-slaves. I am not certain whether everything Marx wrote is compatible with this, but I think he wanted it to be.

Lenin and Trotsky were very great revolutionaries, but neither of them had the slightest idea about any of this. (Serge gets a lot closer.) They saw the revolution as an unfortunate necessity; living humanly came later. We must study their work, to see how the conditions under which they fought made it almost impossible to see it any differently, even for them. Now, it becomes possible, though difficult. That is why I shall continue to fight against every tendency to cling to old formulas, categories and habits of thought.

Best wishes,
Cyril

