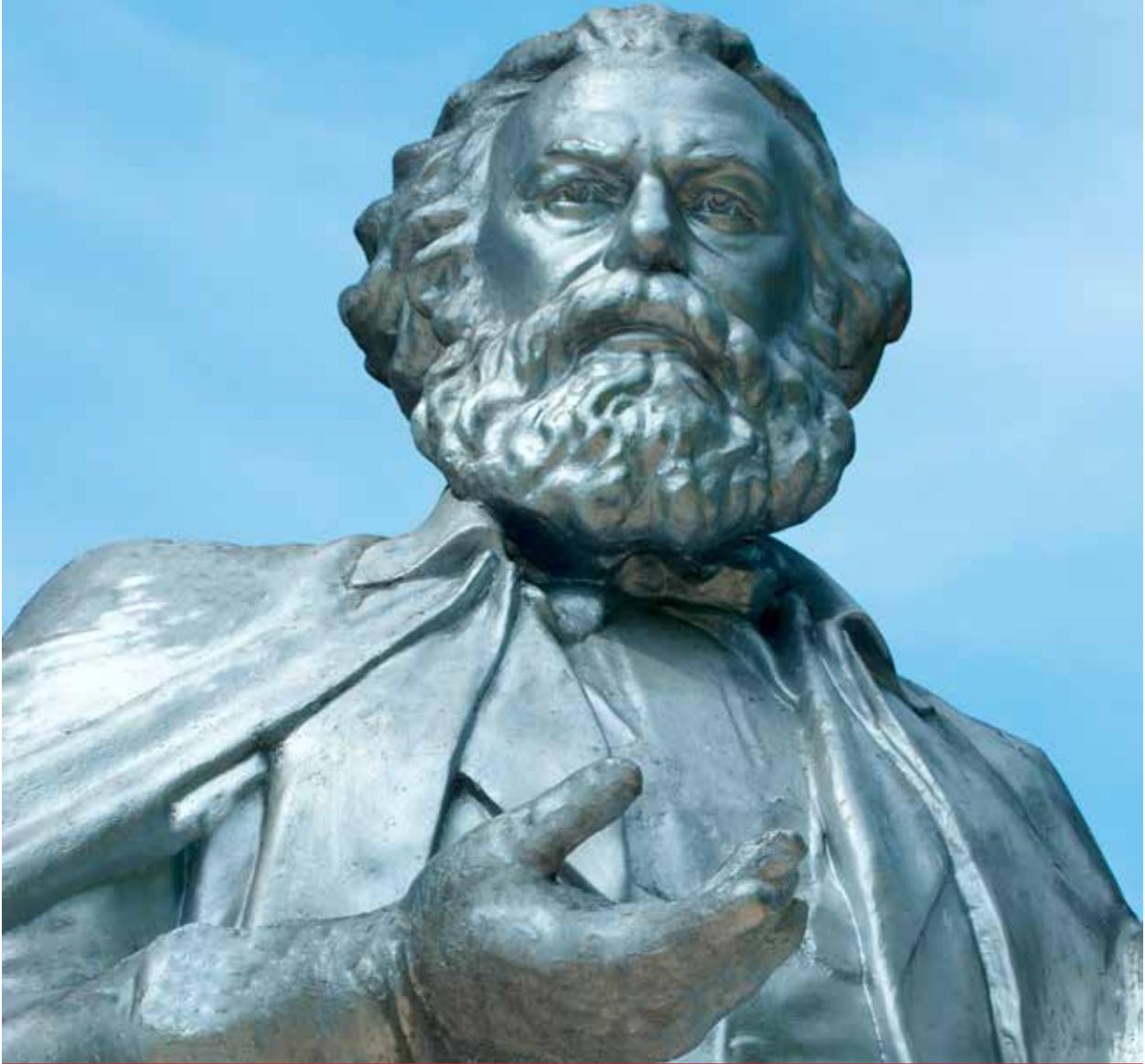


Karl Marx and the Future Society



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By Donald Ramotar

May 5, 2018, marked the bi-centenary of the birth of Karl Marx, one of the most powerful thinkers of all times. The fact that articles are being written and events are being held all over the world to commemorate this event is a demonstration of the relevance of Marx even today.

This is an important point to make, since his 'death' was proclaimed over and over again since his passing in 1883.

Marx's Theory

Presently there is a debate regarding Marx's analysis of capitalism. Time and time again it has proved to be correct and has stood the test of time.

Marx pointed out that the main contradiction of capitalism was the social nature of production and the private appropriation of wealth. He also predicted that free competition would lead to monopoly. Another very important prediction was that under capitalism wealth would be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands.

Today, the social nature of production that Marx spoke about is not just confined within a country but has become global. Globalisation has led to a global socialisation of production. Monopolies are the dominant feature of capitalism today with many monopoly corporations commanding more wealth than a lot of nation states. Not only do we have monopolies, but transnational corporations as global wealth is essentially social, appropriated privately.

As far as concentration is concerned it has reached unprecedented heights. Figures from many international organisations point out that the wealth held by fifty-eight of the world's richest persons is more than the wealth held by the bottom half of the world's population or three and a half billion people. The concentration is deepening. A decade ago the figure was 300 persons. So life has proven Marx's analysis to be true.

Moreover, Marx's approach in many other areas remains relevant today. His methodology in the study of history is used by all universities throughout the world, even though Marx is not always

given credit for that.

His impact on sociology, philosophy, arts and culture has been very substantial.

Where some social scientists part with Marx is his conclusion that society must develop beyond capitalism.

Marx was not the first to speak about the development of a new communist society. Before him we had Robert Owen from England; Saint Simon from France, among others who propagated this new society.

Where Marx differed from Owen and others was how to get to that new society.

For Owen and company, persuasion was the main tool. They used moral arguments to try to persuade the capitalist to join in the communist project.

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Marx called them utopian. He was of the view that the capitalists could not be persuaded in that direction. He came to the conclusion after his profound study of history that capitalism was a phase in human development. It logically must develop towards socialism/communism. What had to take place was a revolution.

Marx identified the forces that would lead the revolution as the proletariat, which he described as the working class of the 19th century. He wrote that the working class can only free itself from exploitation by freeing society as a whole. Eventually, he argued that such a revolution would lead to a classless society.

Critics claimed that Marx himself was a utopian. They argued that man

was inherently greedy and selfish and, therefore, capitalism cannot be destroyed, only modified.

Marx rejected that argument. For him people are essentially good. It is capitalism and exploitation that has made us selfish. To cure that a revolution is needed.

Bourgeois propaganda has gained some credence because of the developments in the world in recent times. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics has collapsed. So too have the Eastern European socialist countries.

Some others who have tried to build a new socialist society have run into many difficulties. Many economies are suffering from serious problems and shortages are pronounced.

To be sure a lot of the problems spoken about above are as a result of enormous economic, political and even military pressures from western capitalist countries, mainly the US and EU states.

Having said that, however, we cannot close our eyes to the fact that many mistakes were made. The mistakes are both theoretical and practical.

It is true that Marx did not write very much on what the new society would be like. However, he did deposit some thought, mainly in the debates he had with some socialists of his day.

However, generally he avoided speaking about how the new society would be. He felt that the future generations would be more intelligent than his generation and it would be their task to find the right strategy and tactics to build the new society.

Even though his remarks were few in relation to the construction of socialism/communism, what he wrote are invaluable and should be looked at again. This is important since time and again the socialist forces have contributed to their own defeat.

The first of Marx's thoughts that dealt with the building of a new society was found in the *Communist Manifesto* co-authored with Frederick Engels. They wrote: "...the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, to win the battle for democracy..." Significantly, they went

on to add: "...the proletariat will use its political supremacy to wrest by degree all capital from the bourgeoisie... and to increase the total productive forces as rapidly as possible..."

This was not some reference in passing. It was a well-considered position by Marx and Engels. As Engels explains in his work, *Principles of Communism*, we see how Engels answered the question "Will it be possible to abolish private property at one blow?". Answer, "No, such a thing would be just as impossible. Hence, the proletarian revolution... will only be able gradually to transform existing society and will abolish private ownership only when the necessary quantity of means of production has been created..."

Following on that question was another, "What will be the course of the revolution?" Here is how Engels put the answer, "In the first place it will inaugurate a democratic constitution and thereby, directly or indirectly, the political rule of the proletariat..." Here he implied that real democracy is only possible when the working people are in power because they are the majority. He went on to identify some methods by which the process of transformation would take place. Firstly, the restriction of private ownership by means of progressive taxes, high inheritance taxes; and secondly, the gradual expropriation of landed proprietors, factory owners, railway and shipping magnates, partly through competition on the part of the state industry and partly directly through the payment of compensation in currency notes" (cash).

Clearly, Marx and Engels had a very realistic opinion on how a socialist revolution would proceed. They were extremely practical with the approach to the economy and to the stages of a successful revolution.

This approach was seen in another work in which Marx had criticised the German Party's programme. This was his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. This programme was authored by Lassalle, an economist, who had considerable influence in the party and among the workers. Lassalle was advocating, among other things, that workers should get "... all of what they produced. This is how Lassalle

put it: "... The proceeds of labour belongs, undiminished, with equal right to all members of society..." Marx was brutal in his criticism of the Programme, showing its impractical side and its obvious errors.

Marx wrote; "What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has developed on its own foundation, but on the contrary, just as it emerges from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerges".

He was very clear too that it will take time to transform society into becoming more inclusive and harmonious. He said, "Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of revolutionary transformation of the one into the other".

What is clear is that Marx saw the

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need for workers to take power as soon as they possibly could. It was important to break-up the old state apparatus and to establish people's power. It is also important to note his emphasis on democracy.

Marx felt that a socialist society must be superior to a capitalist society in every respect, politically, socially and economically.

He clearly advocated a sober and careful approach in dealing with the economy. His emphasis again was that production must increase to satisfy people's needs. In that way he felt that the selfishness and greed that bourgeois theoreticians spoke of would be gradually overcome.

Engels in his *Principles of Communism* put it in the following way: "...large scale industry and the unlimited expansion of production

made possible by it (here he was talking about international trade) can bring into being a social order wherein so much of all necessities of life is produced that every member of society will be able to develop and to apply all his powers and abilities in the fullest freedom..." In other philosophical works Marx spoke about the emergence of the 'new man'.

With abundance and without the exploitative capitalist relations, greed and selfishness can be overcome.

Post Marx Revolution

Clearly, Marx, while not laying out a total blueprint of how the new society would be built, had recognised some important general conditions.

The revolutions which have occurred since the passing of Marx and Engels have made a great impact on humanity and history. Those that collapsed generated much despondency in the left movement. In many ways the left has not fully recovered from the setbacks. It is, therefore, important that we examine some general and a few specific issues that affected the transition to Socialism.

In the first place, revolutions create great enthusiasm. Most leaders of revolutions tend to get carried away and make great mistakes, in particular, in the way they handle economic issues. Often a reckless haste develops that leads to adventurism in economics. People and their leaders tend to move too fast, initiating massive nationalisation and confiscation when the capacity to manage does not exist and when all the traits of capitalism, such as corruption, greed, etc. are still the most dominant features of the society.

On the other hand, some revolutionaries who see the dangers of moving too fast and creating much dislocation go to the other extreme and move much too slowly. That allows the capitalist forces to take advantage and sabotage the process of change.

In between these two extremes, lie other issues that may be described as mistakes.

The Great October Socialist Revolution, led by Lenin, made a tremendous impact internationally.

Internally too it generated tremendous energy and generated great enthusiasm. Feats of labour accomplished were unbelievable. Some of their heroes of Socialist Labour had awards in their names. One such award, the Stakanov Award was emulating the worker, Stakanov, who produced greatly.

Many revolutionaries felt that that enthusiasm would last forever. That, of course, was impossible.

That was a common mistake made by almost all revolutionaries.

The young Cuban Revolution had started a debate led mainly by Che Guevara stating that moral incentives were more important than material incentives. No doubt he was infected by the massive enthusiasm of the revolutions.

Lenin had recognised very early that it was impossible to keep up the momentum by moral incentives. He very early spoke about the need for material incentives. It is important to improve the quality of life of the people on an ongoing basis.

After the October Revolution Lenin realised the mistakes that were being made. It is apposite to recall that he gave back some of the nationalised factories to their Russian owners. He also offered to give back to some foreign investors. However, the Civil War and the invasion of Soviet Russia stopped that from materialising.

Lenin developed a New Economic Plan which was essentially an economic plan based on a tri-sectional economy: the state, cooperative and private sectors. It was more reflecting Marx's ideas of handling the economy in the early period. The reader is also encouraged to read Lenin's work *The Impending catastrophe and how to combat it*.

Unfortunately, Lenin died quite early. The hostility from the West and internal sabotage saw Stalin taking the easy way out. He abandoned Lenin's plan. The Soviet model which most countries followed was based on the state taking over the economy lock, stock and barrel. Forced collectivisation led to serious setbacks in agriculture.

Those same mistakes were repeated over and over again by later revolutions. This approach created shortages, lower levels of production

and in many cases an erosion of living standards.

Some that recognised this mistake went to the other extreme. They moved too slowly to bring about fundamental changes and transformation.

South Africa may be such an example.

In the first place the armed struggle did not come to an end with any side claiming victory. Instead, the Apartheid regime, no doubt with the advice and assistance of Western Powers, sought to negotiate an end to the armed struggle.

The ANC led alliance recognised that the armed struggle would take a long time and cost many lives, so it agreed to negotiate the end of apartheid.

However, in so doing the forces of

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reaction retained a lot of power in the bureaucracy, including the police and army.

The South African revolutionaries, no doubt influenced by the terrible dislocations that Mozambique and Angola experienced sought to avoid that.

Major sectors of the economy were not properly transformed and are still in the hands of a minority of whites. Moreover the land reform programme was haphazard and lacked implementation, leaving many black people landless.

Like many other revolutions that preceded it, the bureaucracy grew. A new class developed mainly the bureaucratic elite which sides with some elements of the old order.

As was the case in many other revolutions, it seems to have run out of energy and while much was

achieved, fundamental transformation in the economic sphere did not occur.

Lenin often said that politics was not just a science but also an art. Therefore, it is important to be able to judge the right time to take action. Going too fast or too slowly have their negative consequences; both exhaust the revolution and prevent it from reaching its goals.

China's Experience

In judging the right moments and the pace of the revolution in its task of transforming the society we should look at the experience of the People's Republic of China.

Having also made serious mistakes at the beginning of the revolution, China, from the 1970s began to relook at their strategies and tactics. The year 1978 was significant in this regard.

Led by Deng Xiaoping, the CPC summed up their experience and made fundamental changes to correct the mistakes of the past. China went back to using all forms of ownership: state, cooperative and private. In 1978, its policies resembled Lenin's NEP.

It balanced very well the issue of material and moral incentives. It applied Marx's concept in the beginning of the construction of socialism: from each according to his/her ability; to each according to his/her needs. China's handling of the economy needs to be studied. Its lessons could be very instructive.

Today, China has been transformed. It is now the second largest economy in the world. It is rapidly catching up with the US. At the same time it is the main driving force of the international economy.

China's experience is the best example of the creative application of Marxism in the building of the new society, which in the process is developing the new socialist person.

Other countries are learning the lessons of China. Vietnam is now rapidly developing, also correcting its initial mistakes.

Marx's relevance in the post capitalist society is being proven in these countries. ■