

Socialism Criticizes Itself

By MILTON HOWARD

WE ARE still at the foothills of the great developments, practical and theoretical, which were embodied in the views of the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. But we know that they mark a new stage in Marxist thought, a breaking out of dogmas, a renovation of Marxist science which is always in conflict with itself as it strives incessantly to get closer to the constantly altering objective truth in the world.

The world's first Socialist revolution is criticizing itself. It is taking stock. It is nothing if not critical.

Past revolutions, even the most liberating, like American and French revolutions of the 18th century, could not criticize themselves from the same revolutionary standpoint with which they began. Such revolutions—and their bracing impact is still felt in modern society—always present a contradiction between their aims and their realization. The philosophers summon society to its liberating tasks; the people press forward with exuberant ardor; they begin to strain the boundaries set by the men of property who proceed to take over. These brush aside their own earlier proclamations. The author of the revolutionary "Marseillaise," Rouget de Lisle, looks out of the window during the people's uprising of 1830 and cries out, "The people are going wild! They are singing the Marseillaise!" The magnificent Jeffersonian visions of the young American republic collide with the Shays Rebellion; the property-less Jeffersonians face the debt-collecting militia, their recent brothers-in-arms.

The post-revolutionary generation criticizes the "excesses" of freedom. At a suitable interval, there appears the criticism which denies that the revolution should have taken place at all. Is not man tainted with Original Sin? Does not popular democracy's "excesses" lead to Communism, where social production becomes social property? (See

the literature beginning with Edmund Burke's attack on the French Revolution, the books of De Maistre and Bonald, down to the latest New Conservative in the United States.)

The greatest revolutions of the past always criticize themselves for having gone "too far." The Socialist Revolution is now criticizing itself for not having gone far enough. It reproaches itself for not having provided enough freedom, for not having done enough to create the conditions in which its own revolutionary state power will disappear as useless and obsolete.

THERE are contradictions between Socialist aims and Socialist reality. Socialist criticism is not launched at its aims, but only at its failure to realize the aims. In a great passage, Karl Marx gave us this essence of the new kind of revolution:

"Working class revolutions . . . criticize themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin afresh, deride with merciless thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses, and meagerness of their first attempts." (*Eighteenth Brumaire*, K. Marx, International Publishers, p. 17.)

Three years after Stalin's death, the world's first Socialist revolution is putting itself into a historical perspective. It can do this only because it stands on the plateau of unshakeable victories. From this plateau it is able better to unmask its errors, its injustices, its tragedies. For we know better now that the first three and a half decades of this Socialist revolution were marked, amid conditions of capitalist encirclement, not only by miracles of social advance, but also by a debasement of its own socialist democracy which took, in the grave words of *Pravda*, "monstrous forms." How monstrous, the news of the unjustified execution of Jewish cultural leaders has just revealed to us.

We know better than before how deeply the new socialist society still bears traces of the old. Socialist ownership of the means of production is not of itself a guarantee of an uncomplicated progress toward freedom. Even the most experienced of all the Marxist parties could find itself the victim of the "cult of personality."

This apparently produced, during the latter years of Stalin's leadership, a serious deformation of that country's political system toward one-man domination, and a suppression of the right of criticism without which socialism cannot attain its goal of the fully liberated human being.

IT IS ALSO apparent in the light of the revolution's criticism of itself that the first Socialist state entered into incorrect relationships with other Socialist states. That this was based partly on necessary factors (the need for defense against aggressive imperialist encirclement), and partly on historically avoidable factors (here Stalin's mistakes appear as the main cause), does not diminish the harm done. The Tito affair was plainly one expression of this historic error in the new problems of Socialist state relationships. The ghastly injustices now announced by the leadership in Hungary are an even more appalling expression of the same error.

But this is an error whose mere announcement does not satisfy reason or historic objectivity. How do guiltless men "confess" in open Socialist courts? The question is insistent, baffling, and painful. The moral, no less than the political, basis of Socialism, compels a full clarification based on evidence, reasonableness, candor. The crimes committed in the Rajk frame-ups—and the others, if there were others—were not committed by Socialism. They were committed against Socialism. Frame-ups are a necessity to political reaction; they are the antithesis of Socialist justice. But these acts were committed in responsible countries, and certainly with the agreement, deluded or otherwise, of leaders who have the Socialist obligation of explaining the process of such a tragedy, and the social means by which such injustice can be prevented from happening again.

It is not a matter here of putting Socialism or the Socialist states on trial. This is an absurdity which history itself mocks. For in practice, the first Socialist state gave of its blood, its tears, its endless sacrifices so that mankind would not live under Hitler's heel. This state sought to prevent—and it could have been prevented—World War II through its appeal for a collective front with the USA and Britain against the Nazis before 1939. The Soviet Union held back the fires of war which threatened the world throughout the Cold War decade. It is the state which at this hour stands as a tireless protagonist of the peaceful co-existence of capitalist and socialist systems, and the abolition of atomic war. What is involved here is a clearer view of the first stage in the development of Socialism, the "encirclement stage" of a single Socialist country, so that Marxian Socialism can go forward.

For this we need more light on the situation faced by the Soviet leaders during the years when, according to their indictment, there was a

limiting of full Marxist leadership. Was it a choice of facing a split party and a disrupted country, certain to be conquered by the looming aggressor, or acquiescing until a more favorable historic relation of forces should arrive? We will know more as the facts are made available.

ONE watches the curious dismay of certain critics of Socialism now that their criticisms have been accepted as true in part. A self-criticizing Socialism is even more formidable in their eyes than a Socialism which—as the 20th Congress noted—had become rigid and had begun to brake its own advance. They are right in their disquiet. For their instinct tells them that Socialist policy is undergoing a painful self-exposure of shortcomings and injustices just as Marxism has achieved a historic turning-point enormously favorable to itself and to humanity. What are the elements of this turning-point which represent a triumph of Socialist theory and practice?

The Socialist leadership of the Soviet Union has achieved the most rapid industrialization in history. The modernization of Soviet socialist society now proceeds on the basis of a mastery of atomic technology not only equal to, but admittedly superior in certain respects to the best in other countries.

With the victory over Hitler, with the triumph of the Chinese Revolution, and the emergence of India and the colonial peoples into the center of world politics, the scale has definitely been tipped in favor of coexistence, freedom and Socialism.

The Marxist parties are mass parties in France and Italy. No bribery, threat or deceit has been able to shake them from this position. Perhaps the most disconcerting development of all for reaction has been its inability to use atomic war as a means of curbing either the peoples of Western Europe, the colonial millions, or the peoples of the Socialist states.

With this, the men of monopoly property face a new situation. Among them some still stake their destiny on the "final overthrow," on atomic suicide. But the new quality which has entered history makes itself felt against them. The people are consciously affecting the course of history as never before. Marxian Socialism, having weathered the mightiest storms during the first half of the century, is now moving forward from this initial stage of its advance in the twentieth century.

New relationships are arising among Marxist parties as these parties become more deeply rooted within the national tradition, and as they move to make themselves the defender and leader of the nation. Marxism, ever the enemy of fixed ideas, dogma, or ritual, turns its clear eyes on the new social facts, and comes up with new propositions.

Proposition one: war is no longer inevitable even though war-seeking imperialism still exists. Thus, Lenin's proposition of inevitable war based on the world of the first decades of the century is no longer true in the sense that he expressed it. The advance of Socialism and its allied forces has changed it.

Proposition two: it is no longer true—in fact, it never was an absolute of Marxism—that the working class faces an inevitable civil war for Socialism, or that it must create a new governmental form. It is now true that a future peaceful transition to Socialism is possible. It even becomes more probable as the scale tips toward peace and democratic freedom. Parliaments or Congresses can be transformed by the working class-led majority into expressions of popular will. Naturally, this requires big social changes, and the rise of new political alliances among the progressive forces in the country.

This view assumes that there will develop a preponderance of the popular forces pressing for economic and social change. It assumes that the banks and industrial power can be compelled, under such historic conditions, to accept of necessity the process of democratic change. Disruption of the democratic process of change will be on the heads of those in power who oppose it. American Marxism now challenges Big Capital to declare through its spokesmen that it is ready to abide by any democratic national decision for Socialism, or for changes leading to it. (See speeches by John Gates and Eugene Dennis, New York City, January 20, 1956.)

It seems to me that the defense of the rights of Constitutional social change—with all the implications of a free clash of ideas based on reason and evidence—brings American liberalism and American Marxism into a closer solidarity than has been the case for some time. The disagreements between liberalism and Marxism remain, of course. They need to be fought out on the level of thought in the every-day forums of daily practical life as well as in debate. In our opinion, the Marxian analysis of society, of classes and of the nature of historic change, is confirmed by the test of experience. But liberalism and Marxism have a common

enemy in the forces of irrationalism, anti-scientific bigotry, and the formidable assault which has been mounted against rationalistic humanism in recent years. Marxism and liberalism believe in human progress; their enemies do not.

Liberalism would stultify itself were it to conclude that the self-criticism of Marxian Socialism now makes that working class science outmoded or morally suspect. Liberalism could not have achieved socialism in the first place, or produced the enormous achievements from which the Soviet Union now confidently views its past, present and future. On the other hand, it would seem that Marxian Socialists could better apply the classic Marxist credo of giving a more attentive ear to criticism even when it comes from those with a different philosophic basis. The problem of freedom can only get a fundamental solution on the basis of historical materialism; but this does not justify the "communist conceit" from which we have suffered when it came to giving ear to very earnest criticism, a good deal of which is now proved to have been highly relevant, even if it was not always couched in the best way.

The creative influence of Marxism is bound to grow after the present act of self-criticism; it is growing already in the very process. The realities of the United States will be illuminated by Marxism and Marxism in turn will be enriched by our American national experience. "Look homeward, angel!" There is so much to do.