

21ST CENTURY SOCIALISM: REFORM OR REVOLUTION?

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Many thanks to the organizers and sponsors of this event, and especially Professor Raju Das, for the invitation to speak here today.... I should mention at the outset that much of this talk draws freely on some of my published work over the past ten years, in particular my 2010 book *Global Capitalism in Crisis* and an essay I co-wrote with Josh Dumont entitled “Socialist Strategy, Yesterday and Today: Notes on Classical Marxism and the Contemporary Radical Left,” which appeared in my 2014 book *Marxist Phoenix*.

As we draw close to the end of this bicentenary year of Karl Marx’s birth, I want to begin by suggesting that the experience of the past half-century has amply vindicated many of Marx’s most important predictions about the fundamental dynamics and laws of motion of capitalism. Numerous studies, for instance, have now established that the average rate of profit falls over the long term and that this is associated with the displacement of living labour from production through technological innovation. And just as Marx anticipated, crises of profitability have been answered by capital and governments with attempts to lower real wage levels, intensify the labour process, undermine workers’ rights, and cut or eliminate popular social programs that are perceived to have negative implications for private profitability. At the same time that it has generated an extraordinary concentration

of wealth among the world's richest individuals, the global economy has also created a huge "surplus population" of well over a billion unemployed and underemployed people, a mass of human beings whose capacity for productive activity is effectively squandered by global capitalism. The near-universal monopoly exercised by the capitalist class over the world's most powerful means of production can only mean that the advanced technologies that capitalism has brought into being are *not* being used to raise the productivity or improve the well-being of the economically marginalized, but continue to be used instead as weapons in a ruthlessly competitive and class-antagonistic contest whose overriding object remains the amassing of private profit.

Of course, Marxism's many obituary writers – and there have been many of these since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 – will acknowledge none of this. Instead, what they usually emphasise is the purported failure of Marx's "predictions" that the working class would (a) eventually become a revolutionary class "for itself" and (b) proceed to build an egalitarian socialist society in which political power would be democratically exercised by the "associated producers." The alleged failure of the first prediction is said to demonstrate that Marx assigned too great a significance to class struggle in human affairs and entertained unrealistic ideas about the revolutionary capacity of the working class; the failure of the second is said to show that democracy and economic collectivism are incompatible and that any attempt to move beyond capitalism can only lead to the rise of a totalitarian social order dominated by a new class of state bureaucrats. This, at any rate, is the politically expedient, if not exactly "correct," balance sheet on Marxism that is happily embraced by a great majority of what passes for the contemporary

“intelligentsia” — and accepted, at least to some extent, by all-too-many contemporary radical intellectuals and activists.

A compelling Marxist response to this familiar critical assessment of Marxist theory and practice exists but is rarely addressed by Marx’s critics or even by many of his would-be defenders. In what does it consist? In the first place, it involves an insistence upon an accurate historical accounting of the record of working-class struggle against capitalism. Although it’s true that history has seen only one successful working-class, socialist revolution — the Bolshevik-led revolution of 1917 in Russia — it is utterly wrong to suggest that the working class has not shown a revolutionary capacity in a great many other times and places since Marx’s time. That this history is not only ignored but also deliberately buried by the enemies of Marxist socialism should surprise no one. That it often remains unknown or at least understudied by many of today’s leftist intellectuals and activists is a striking confirmation of Marx’s thesis that the educators must themselves be educated.

Marx’s confidence in the capacity of the revolutionary working class to build an egalitarian and democratic socialist order might also seem to have been misplaced in light of the record of “socialist construction” over the past century; but once again, a careful historical appreciation of these experiences suggests that the assumptions upon which that expectation was based have been scarcely refuted. Indeed, if anything, the historical record confirms Marx’s warning that a fully socialist/communist transcendence of capitalism requires the presence of highly developed forces of production brought into

being by capitalism itself. Among these are a worldwide division of labour, a technologically sophisticated productive apparatus and a well-educated working class capable of assuming the tasks of democratic self-administration. Unfortunately, a comparatively low level of development of such productive forces characterized the conditions under which countries like the Soviet Union and China attempted to “construct socialism” on a national basis in the twentieth century. Not surprisingly, the results were quite mixed and certainly less than inspirational, especially to those enjoying affluent life-styles in the richest enclaves of the developed capitalist world. The (false) identification of these ‘actually existing socialisms’ with Marx’s own vision of communist society served both to legitimate the phenomenon of Stalinism – that is to say, bureaucratic rule on the basis of collectivized property forms – in the eyes of some while discrediting it in the eyes of others. Notwithstanding its ubiquity this misleading identification has done enormous damage to the cause of Marxist socialism and to the development of the class struggle as envisioned by Marx and his revolutionary socialist successors. This calls for a somewhat detailed historical review.

Recognizing the (largely unconscious) striving for a different, communist future that is implicit in even the most “economistic” of labour strikes is key to a specifically Marxist understanding of class struggle. As Marx noted in a letter to Joseph Weydemeyer in 1852:

As to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them.... What I did that was new was to demonstrate: 1) that the *existence of classes* is merely linked to *particular*

historical phases in the development of production, 2) that class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society. (Marx and Engels 1975: 64)

This insistence upon the centrality of the proletariat to the struggle for socialism underpins the fundamental Marxian political principle that the working class must strive to achieve complete organizational and political *independence* from the capitalist class – expressed above all, in the programme and practice of its revolutionary leadership. Addressing the Communist League in March 1850, Marx and Engels declared:

[I]t is our interest and our task to make the revolution permanent until all the more or less propertied classes have been driven from their ruling positions, until the proletariat has conquered state power and until the association of the proletarians has progressed sufficiently far – not only in one country but in all the leading countries of the world – that competition between the proletarians of these countries ceases and at least the decisive forces of production are concentrated in the hands of the workers. Our concern cannot simply be to modify private property, but to abolish it, not to hush up class antagonisms but to abolish classes, not to improve the existing society but to found a new one. (1973: 323-324)

In the early 20th century, several revolutionary socialists made critically important extensions and refinements to this Marxist program of working-class self-emancipation, above all, Rosa Luxemburg, Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. The contributions of these three outstanding Marxists deserve our closest consideration in exploring the

question of reform versus revolution in the 21st century – for they established with great clarity what is truly *distinctive* about revolutionary Marxism in relation to other putatively socialist approaches, both in the past and today.

In her pivotal 1900 polemic *Social Reform or Revolution*, Rosa Luxemburg developed an uncompromising critique of the “revisionist,” reformist current that had emerged in the German Social Democratic Party in the 1890s. Revisionism had drawn upon pre-existing tensions and tendencies within the Social Democracy to formulate for the first time an explicitly reformist perspective, as summed up in Eduard Bernstein’s famous adage: “The final goal, whatever it may be, is nothing to me; the movement is everything.” Reduced to its essentials, Bernstein’s strategic conception was that Social Democrats should not be trying to prepare the ground for a socialist revolution but should instead champion the socialist cause by fortifying the material, political and organizational strength of the working class within capitalist society. To use a formula much cited by later generations of revisionists, the immediate goal was to ‘alter the relationship of class forces in favour of labour’ through incremental social reforms wrested from capital and the state. An evolutionary as opposed to a revolutionary pathway to socialism was thus posited.

In her vigorous defence of classical Marxism and a revolutionary socialist perspective, Luxemburg insisted that the reformist socialism of Bernstein was not, in fact, a genuine socialism at all. She wrote:

He who pronounces himself in favor of the method of legal reforms *in place of and as opposed to* the conquest of political power and social revolution does not really choose a more tranquil, surer and slower road to the *same* goal. He chooses

a *different* goal. Instead of taking a stand for the establishment of a new social order, he takes a stand for surface modifications of the old order. (1971: 115-116)

At the heart of revisionist theory, Luxemburg argued, is a corruption of Marxism. Marx's understanding of the class struggle is formally acknowledged, as is the need for socialism. But whereas Marxism regards the dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary culmination of the class struggle and prepares the social revolution to achieve it, revisionism seeks to *mitigate* class antagonisms and to "*attenuate* the capitalist contradictions" (ibid: 89) through social reform. She wrote: "As soon as immediate practical results become the principal aim, the clear-cut, irreconcilable class standpoint, which has meaning only in so far as it proposes to take power, will be found more and more an obstacle" (ibid: 87).

In opposition to the revisionist view, Luxemburg insisted that the existing state is a "class state" – the political-repressive organization of the ruling class – and that "the natural limits of social reforms lie with the interest of capital" (ibid: 76). Rather than limiting workers' struggles to a fight for reforms, the duty of Marxist socialists was to orient these struggles toward the destruction of the capitalist state: "Only the hammer blow of revolution, that is, *the conquest of political power by the proletariat*, can break down [the 'wall between capitalist and socialist society']" (ibid: 84-85). Here Luxemburg echoes Marx's famous declaration in *The Civil War in France* that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes" (1974: 206). She also anticipates Lenin's insistence in *The State and Revolution* (1917)

that the proletariat must establish its own unique organs of class rule and “smash” the capitalist state.

Luxemburg’s position was clearly revolutionary, but it must be viewed in historical context. As a socialist leader writing at the turn of the 20th century, her political framework was still that of German Social Democracy’s Erfurt Program of 1891, a program that separated minimal demands for social reform from the “maximum” goal of socialism. Luxemburg charged the revisionists with *counterposing* the minimum and maximum programs, whereas, in her view, the “struggle for reform is [the party’s] *means*; the social revolution, its *goal*” (1971: 52).

Two key developments would soon pose the need for significant changes and extensions to the programmatic and strategic arsenal of classical Marxism. The first was the consolidation (and crisis) of an imperialist stage of capitalist development, expressed most sharply with the outbreak of the First World War. The second was Russia’s socialist revolution of 1917, the only revolution in history to bring the working class to power. Indisputably, the two principal leaders of that revolution, Lenin and Trotsky, were also the most important theoreticians of 20th century revolutionary Marxism.

Lenin’s most important theoretical contribution was to draw out and systematize the politico-organizational lessons of the experience of the Second International in light of the support that the national leaderships of most Social Democratic parties gave to their own governments at the start of World War I. In two central texts (“The Collapse of the Second International” [1915a] and “Socialism and War” [1915b]), Lenin argued that the political basis for “social imperialism” or “social chauvinism” was the widespread and

growing trend toward *opportunism* in the Second International. At bottom, Lenin argued, the social basis for opportunism (the appetite to *reconcile* the interests of capital and wage labour) is the petty bourgeoisie, and, most significantly, a relatively privileged and conservative layer of the working class – “a petty-bourgeois ‘upper stratum’ or aristocracy (and bureaucracy) of the working class” (1915a: 243) supported by the surpluses generated by imperialist plunder. Lenin observed: “An entire social stratum, consisting of parliamentarians, journalists, labour officials, privileged office personnel, and certain strata of the proletariat, has sprung up and has become *amalgamated* with its own national bourgeoisie, which has proved fully capable of appreciating and ‘adapting’ it” (1915a: 250).

Before the war, the opportunist current was seen as more or less harmless, marginalized insofar as the proletarian character of the Social Democracy remained secure. Yet the “all encompassing,” “inclusive” breadth of the Social Democratic movement (formulated by Karl Kautsky as “a party of the whole class”) entailed a highly problematic “unity” between revolutionaries and reformists and led, through an inexorable logic, to the growing influence of the latter at the expense of the former, particularly in the mass workers’ parties of Western and Central Europe. For the reformists, the prospect of winning office electorally and then administering the existing capitalist state – purportedly in a new and more “progressive” way – was not only more realistic than the revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist order; it was also a far more alluring and appetizing one.

On the eve of World War I, Lenin was already insisting that: “Unity is a great thing and a great slogan. But what the workers’ cause needs is the *unity of Marxists*, not unity between Marxists, and opponents and distorters of Marxism” (1914: 231). A year later, he went further and argued that Kautsky’s conception of “*unity* with the opportunists *actually* means subordinating the working class to their ‘own’ national bourgeoisie” (1915b: 311). This marked the beginning of Lenin’s transformation from a revolutionary Social Democrat of the Second International into the eventual founder and central leader of a new, revolutionary International.

As early as 1915, Lenin had concluded that the need for “a *new* form of organisation and struggle,” as revealed by the historic betrayal of the Social Democracy, flowed from the demands of a new historical epoch:

The crisis created by the great war has torn away all coverings, swept away conventions, exposed an abscess that has long come to a head, and revealed opportunism in its true role of ally of the bourgeoisie. The complete organisational severance of this element from the workers’ parties has become imperative. The epoch of imperialism cannot permit the existence, in a single party, of the revolutionary proletariat’s vanguard and the semi-petty-bourgeois aristocracy of the working class.... (1915a: 254, 257)

On this basis, Lenin re-evaluated the experience of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, which, for several years, had been split *de facto* into two separate parties: the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. Upholding the Bolshevik Party as a model, Lenin (1915b: 329) proposed to construct a new international socialist organization that would

regroup the revolutionary *vanguard* of the working class into a Third International. The Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács, an early convert to Lenin's project, observed that this "vanguard party" perspective involved a basic reassertion of the role of the "subjective factor" in history. Lukács wrote:

Lenin's concept of organization ... means a *double break with mechanical fatalism*; both with the concept of proletarian class-consciousness as a mechanical product of its class situation, and with the idea that the revolution itself was only the mechanical working out of fatalistically explosive economic forces which – given the sufficient "maturity" of objective revolutionary conditions – would somehow "automatically" lead the proletariat to victory. (1972: 31)

Lenin's insistence on the role of the working-class vanguard as the key subjective element and conscious agent in revolutionary transformation underlies his unwavering commitment to *programmatic clarity*. All tactical considerations and organizational matters should be seen as subordinate to maintaining programmatic integrity. Accordingly, questions of principle and strategy ought never to be set aside in pursuit of the short-term gains that might be achieved through a spurious "unity" with opportunists.

Just as Lenin's concept of the vanguard party was predicated on the imperative for revolutionaries to organize themselves separately from and in opposition to the bureaucrats, revisionists and opportunists who seek an armistice with the bourgeoisie in the class war, Leon Trotsky's decisive contribution was to raise revolutionary Marxist strategy decisively out of the morass of the "minimum program – maximum program" dichotomy. Distilling and clarifying the methods and experiences of the Russian

Bolshevik Party and the early Communist International, Trotsky systematized the idea of a “transitional program” in the founding manifesto of his Fourth International in 1938. He wrote:

The Fourth International does not discard the program of the old “minimal” demands to the degree to which these have preserved at least part of their vital forcefulness. Indefatigably, it defends the democratic rights and social conquests of the workers. But it carries on this day-to-day work within the framework of the correct actual, that is, revolutionary perspective. Insofar as the old, partial “minimal” demands of the masses clash with the destructive and degrading tendencies of decadent capitalism—and this occurs at each step—the Fourth International advances a system of *transitional demands*, the essence of which is contained in the fact that ever more openly and decisively they will be directed against the very bases of the bourgeois regime. The old “minimal program” is superseded by the *transitional program*, the task of which lies in systematic mobilization of the masses for the proletarian revolution. (1998: 36-37)

Among the demands included in Trotsky’s transitional program were the call for a sliding scale of wages and hours (to combat declining real wages and unemployment); opening the books of the employers to worker inspection; the organization of militant picket lines and inter-union solidarity during strikes; workers’ self-defence guards and labour-based militias to defend vulnerable working-class populations; factory committees and workers’ control of industry; a system of soviets – of councils or assemblies – to challenge the power of the capitalist state and lay the foundation for workers’ political power; the

expropriation without compensation of industry and the banks; and finally, as a crowning demand toward which all other transitional demands point, a workers' government.

Trotsky recognized that the selection and presentation of demands by the revolutionary vanguard would have to be tailored to the specific needs and level of consciousness of workers in a given context of struggle. Yet he also insisted that advancing socialist solutions in terms readily understandable to workers should never involve an *adaptation* to ideas that confine the struggle within a capitalist framework. (For example, calls to raise taxes on the rich.) On the contrary, transitional demands and slogans involved building a "bridge" between "today's conditions and from today's consciousness of wide layers of the working class and unalterably leading to one final conclusion: the conquest of power by the proletariat" (ibid: 36).

Crucially, then, a truly transitional program does *not* project "reforms" that simply redistribute income or gradually erode the power of the bourgeoisie; rather, such a program provides a flexible and open-ended basis of struggle around a system of demands that, *taken as a whole*, cannot be satisfied so long as the capitalist state and capitalist ownership of the means of production remain intact. In Trotsky's view, concrete struggles on *this* programmatic basis are key to developing workers' consciousness about the need to seize power, establish a workers' government, and build socialism.

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, various national sections of the early Communist International took up the strategic orientation embodied in the transitional programmatic approach, albeit for a comparatively brief period. In Canada, this found

expression in *Steps to Power – A Program of Action for the Trade Union Minority in Canada* published by the Communist-led Trade Union Educational League. The TUEL's program included such demands as the organization of unorganized workers, the amalgamation of craft unions, the organization of shop committees, the building up of a workers' press, international trade union unity, higher wages, shorter hours, the nationalization of industry, and (last but not least!) the *abolition of capitalism*. This was the wide-ranging program upon which the early Canadian Communists organized rank and file opposition to the pro-capitalist trade union bureaucracy.

After the defeat of the German Revolution in 1923, and the consolidation of Stalinist, bureaucratic domination over the Soviet state and the Communist International, the policies of the Canadian and other Communist parties were decisively subordinated to the short-term twists and turns of Soviet foreign policy. Stalin's program of building "socialism in one country" and promoting "peaceful coexistence" between the capitalist world and the USSR displaced the promotion of world revolution. In its new role, Trotsky argued, the Stalinized Communist International became the "gravedigger" of revolutions, most tragically in Spain between 1936 and 1938. It fell to Trotsky's small band of followers, at first within the International Left Opposition and later the Fourth International, to defend and carry forward the programmatic legacy of revolutionary Marxism.

Within the international labour movement, the authority and prestige enjoyed by the Stalinist regimes (particularly those headed by Joseph Stalin and his successors, and to a lesser extent that of Mao Zedong) were linked to their historic association with successful

anti-capitalist social revolutions. But this authority was repeatedly used to discourage proletarian-revolutionary policies on the international arena and to transform Communist-led workers' movements in the capitalist world into guardians of the "socialist motherland" and instruments of the foreign policy of the Soviet or Chinese governments. The revolutionary energy of the most advanced and socialist-minded layers of the working class was dissipated as the bureaucratic, national-reformist projects of building "socialism in one country" collided with the imperatives of the international workers' movement to advance along the road of socialist revolution. Eventually, as they asserted their independence from Moscow, many of the larger Communist Parties came to resemble mass social-democratic parties – a process that was evident in the "Eurocommunist" turn of the 1970s and accelerated following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Repeated defeats led to a fatal weakening of working-class leadership, organization and consciousness on a global scale. The deliberate derailing by the Stalinist and social-democratic parties alike of a succession of potentially revolutionary working-class upsurges helped stabilize world capitalism, and thereby indirectly strengthened the forces of capitalist restoration in the Soviet bloc and China.

The global regression in class and socialist consciousness that resulted from these many defeats took a terrible toll on those who continued to regard themselves as socialists or communists – producing a significant demoralization and disorientation in the ranks of the putatively socialist left. The upshot has been the ascendancy on what is euphemistically called "the Left" of a spectrum of ideas that, notwithstanding their diversity, have tended to converge in opposition to Marx and Engels' "scientific socialism" and its proletarian-revolutionary perspective. The entry of the world capitalist

economy in 2008 into its most severe crisis since the Great Depression and the “business as usual” (essentially left-reformist) response of most of the putatively socialist and radical left only underscored the vast distance that separates the thinking of these leftists from the urgent task of constructing a new, socialist leadership for the international labour movement.

Today’s radical leftists may still cling to an abstract socialist ideal, but they often do so with a diminished capacity to think with clarity and resolve about the elementary requirements of an effective strategy to overcome capitalism and replace it with a socialist order. Debates about the very real, life-and-death issues that have historically divided socialists – debates that were engaged inadequately but with some seriousness by would-be socialists in the 1960s and 1970s – have not been settled so much as swept to the side. Serious debate over the question of reform versus revolution has been displaced by arid calls for unity, tired and simplistic denunciations of sectarianism, vague platitudes about the need to build new “capacities” in the struggle against exploitation and oppression, and a political practice far more oriented to progressive reform within capitalism than to its supersession.

At the same time, although the working class is still considered a vitally important component of any anti-capitalist movement worthy of the name, a myriad of oppressed groups are considered to be indispensable strategic “allies” in the struggle for socialism. This conception goes well beyond and actually negates the traditional Leninist notion that the revolutionary workers’ party must act as a “tribune of the people” (that is, as the most ardent opponent of all forms of oppression). Instead it involves the problematic notion

that because capitalism is implicated in the oppression of women, indigenous peoples, homosexuals, immigrants, people of colour, youth, the disabled and so on, the struggles of these oppressed groups are implicitly anti-capitalist in some general sense and possess an anti-capitalist “logic” or “dynamic.” While, according to this view, socialists should help “clarify” the anti-capitalist content of these variegated struggles, the idea of a revolutionary workers’ party *leading* the oppressed on the basis of a comprehensive socialist program for human emancipation is rejected.

What’s more, in the view of much of the contemporary radical left, differences that once divided revolutionaries and reformists are now irrelevant or have been reduced in significance in light of recent historical developments, above all the collapse of the Soviet Union and the capitulation of the social democratic parties to neoliberalism. Some currents that still identify with revolutionary socialism now argue that left-reformist perspectives they once fought – for example, those of ‘broad left parties’ like Spain’s Podemos or the Corbynite insurgency in the British Labour Party -- have taken on an objectively revolutionary significance in a context defined by the discrediting of most traditional social-democratic parties. Thus Alex Callinicos, the leading theoretician of the Socialist Workers Party (one of Britain’s largest “far-left” formations and one which formally identifies with Leninism and Trotskyism), has advanced the following argument, which is essentially congruent with the broader radical left’s rejection of Leninist vanguardism. Callinicos wrote:

Social liberalism is repelling many working class people today, but, in the first instance, what they seek is a *more genuine* version of the reformism that their

traditional parties once promised them. Therefore, if the formations of the radical left are to be habitable to these refugees from social democracy, their programmes must not foreclose the debate between reform and revolution by simply incorporating the distinctive strategic conceptions developed by revolutionary Marxists. (emphasis added)

For the past decade or more, this sort of thinking has underwritten the project of unifying ostensible revolutionaries and “genuine reformists” in such formations as France’s New Anti-capitalist Party and the British Respect Coalition, two misbegotten enterprises that ended up actually weakening rather than strengthening their supposedly Leninist-Trotskyist parent organizations: the French Ligue Communiste Revolutionaire and Callinicos’s own Socialist Workers Party.

The concrete approach to practical work associated with this attempted rapprochement between a rhetorical but inauthentic ‘revolutionism’ and a ‘genuine’ reformism is one that is predicated on *adapting* to the *reformist illusions* of the masses. Rather than fighting for a transitional socialist program within workers’ organizations and social movements dominated by reformist perspectives, the job of socialists is seen as simply deepening and radicalizing these movements by drawing out connections and advancing more militant demands. This approach rejects Trotsky’s premise in *The Transitional Program* that the major obstacle to socialist transformation is a “historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat” (1998: 33). Instead, the problem is understood to be that no mass constituency for revolutionary socialist ideas exists today – that the masses are well

and truly reconciled to life under capitalism, and can only envision progressive social change within its framework.

Given this situation, the only way forward is to “build capacities” and develop socialist consciousness by getting working people involved in struggles that promise real advances within the framework of capitalism – baby steps that will teach them how to walk and one day to run. This notion further buttresses the case made by many self-styled Leninists for participating in and building such formations as Germany’s Left Party, Portugal’s Left Bloc, Spain’s Podemos, Québec’s Solidaire, and (most notoriously of all) Greece’s Syriza. In the final analysis, however, this perspective is an essentially *objectivist* one that relies on the “spontaneous” dynamic of “struggle” to change consciousness – precisely the sort of perspective criticized by Lenin in his polemic against ‘economism’ in his classic work *What is to be Done?* Moreover, it is a policy that serves only to intensify the “crisis of leadership” of the working class, rather than resolve it.

In his book *Renewing Socialism* and elsewhere, Leo Panitch has spelled out the logical upshot of the neo-reformist perspective that I’ve been criticizing. Going beyond the rationalizations of the ‘far-left’ effort to effect a tactical reconciliation between revolutionary and reformist politics, Panitch makes no bones about his rejection of so-called “insurrectionary socialism,” by which he means the revolutionary Marxist tradition of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky. While critical of contemporary Social Democracy, he maintains that its rejection of Leninism in the aftermath of World War One and the Russian Revolution was basically sound. He writes: “The premise that underlay the social-democratic position – that an insurrectionary strategy was impossible in the West –

must be recognized as having been fundamentally correct” (2008: 22). Instead of working toward the overthrow of the bourgeois state, “the first task of a democratic socialism, in remaking the state, no less than movement building, is to actively facilitate the creation of democratic capacities” (ibid: 8).

Two observations are in order by way of response to Panitch. The first is that, although he often garnishes his anti-insurrectionary stance with quotations from Antonio Gramsci, his position is actually closer to the views of pre-World War One reformists and centrists like Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein. It’s worth recalling that for many years both of those gentlemen were no less willing to cohabit with self-styled revolutionaries inside ‘broad-left’ parties’ than are the left social democrats who launched Canada’s ‘Socialist Project’ over a decade ago.

Second, the leading representatives of classical revolutionary Marxism would have strenuously objected to Panitch’s notion that they were exponents of an “insurrectionary” *strategy*. Insurrection is in one sense no more a “strategy” than is a general strike or participation in an election (whether for parliament or a soviet-type assembly). Rather, it is essentially a military-technical operation, a tactic of great importance that is appropriate to the penultimate phase of the struggle for power by the working class. As I pointed out many years ago in response to Ralph Miliband’s critique of what he called Trotskyism’s “insurrectionary position”: “Insurrectionary activity can be envisaged only during genuinely revolutionary situations – and these arise only periodically, and under exceptional circumstances” (1996-97: 57). What’s more, a genuinely revolutionary situation in which the seizure of power by the working class is an immediate possibility is

precisely one in which a revolutionary Marxist vanguard is not only present but is also capable of vying in a serious way for the leadership of the mass movement. To dismiss the possibility of a successful insurrection in the absence of a mass revolutionary party is entirely sensible. To reject it when such a party is “on the ground” (as was the case in Germany in 1923, for example) would be to effectively side with the “democratic counter-revolution.”

Rather than entertaining theoretical abstractions violently wrenched from actual historical circumstances, partisans of the anti-Leninist socialist left need to think carefully and concretely about the implications of Panitch’s and Miliband’s “anti-insurrectionary” stance. Above all, they need to decide whether – in the context of events like the October Revolution of 1917, the German Revolution of 1923, the Spanish Revolution of 1936 or the Portuguese Revolution of 1975 – they would stand with those “seeking to limit the mass movement to constitutionalist avenues or with those seeking to lead the working class forward to the conquest of state power” (ibid: 58).

The *fundamental* problem with the left-social-democratic approach of Panitch and Miliband is that it fails to confront the altogether obvious fact that the struggle to abolish capitalism is no easy task — that any serious struggle will encounter the determined resistance of the capitalist class and its agencies at every level. One does not need to defend each and every action taken by Lenin’s Bolsheviks following Russia’s socialist revolution in order to see that the fundamental elements of Lenin’s strategy — the need for a disciplined and programmatically cohesive “democratic-centralist” party, a resolute commitment to the political independence of the working class on the basis of an

internationalist socialist program, and a perspective of smashing” the existing capitalist state machine and replacing it with organs of working-class power (a system of “council democracy”) — are entirely indispensable to any serious and determined effort to overthrow the capitalist order and achieve socialism.

The stubborn fact of the matter is that the anti-Leninist reformist left has yet to articulate any serious, much less convincing, alternative to the body of program and strategy developed by Lenin’s Bolsheviks in the early years of the Third (Communist) International and subsequently refined and augmented by Trotsky and his followers after the Stalinist degeneration of the international communist movement. Unfortunately, instead of paying heed to the “lessons of October” or the hard-won lessons of other important working-class revolts, contemporary radicals are much more likely to agree with Susan George’s dismissive suggestion that a “twenty-first century ‘revolution’ might, perhaps, occur in several ways, but the storming of the Winter Palace isn’t one of them” (2004: 93). George, the long-time president of the Transnational Institute, doesn’t comment on what those several ways might be. Nor does she acknowledge that the conquest of the seat of state power by insurrectionary forces (whether that seat is the Winter Palace, Westminster or the Washington capitol) is a necessary, if not entirely sufficient, condition for the victory of any revolution worthy of the name. All the same, the real purpose of George’s argument against an “all-consuming one-off revolutionary transformation” (whatever that might mean) is not to urge the formulation of a better, more “up to date” revolutionary strategy, but rather to reject the very idea of preparing an insurgent mass anti-capitalist movement for a decisive confrontation with the repressive

agencies of the capitalist order. She writes:

I can barely visualize what such a gigantic one-off event might look or feel like, but history suggests it could only come about after a series of wrenching crises in which millions would suffer and thousands die.... Frankly, I hope such traumatic events can be avoided. (93)

In this single passage, George succeeds in distilling much of the confused thinking that prevails not only in the “global justice movement” (of which she is a prominent leader) but also amongst many “independent socialist” Marxists.

To be a revolutionary socialist — a Leninist, a Trotskyist — is not to *hope* for “traumatic events”; it is to *expect* them and also to *prepare* for them. Indeed, it is to recognize that humanity *lives with them now* and must continue to live with them as long as the rule of capital continues. Furthermore, to be a revolutionary socialist is to recognize that, periodically, mass struggles of workers and other popular forces must come face to face with the question of state power, and that decisive (and often bloody) showdowns will occur irrespective of whether a revolutionary vanguard party is present and poised to lead an insurgent mass movement to victory. Let me quote once again from my polemic against Miliband:

Ultimately, the question [of the relevance of the lessons of the October Revolution] concerns whether — in the context of episodes like the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Spanish Revolution of 1936, or the Portuguese Revolution of 1975 — one will take one’s stand with those seeking to limit the mass movement to constitutionalist avenues or with those seeking to lead the

working class forward to the conquest of state power. To be a Trotskyist means to affirm well in advance of such revolutionary situations which side one will take in the midst of a decisive confrontation (a situation of “dual power”), and it is to proclaim the need to construct a party that will know how to resolve the confrontation decisively in favor of workers’ power. Such a Trotskyist party will certainly distinguish itself from other organizations on the Left in non-revolutionary conjunctures as well, but it will do so precisely as an organization of militants participating in broader movements of struggle against exploitation, oppression, and social injustice — articulating these struggles with a program of socialist transformation... and, through it all, cultivating a spirit of revolution that has at its core a fundamental disrespect for the constitutional limitations, legal framework, and repressive agencies of the capitalist state. (Smith 1996: 58–59)

To make such an argument is not to indulge in sectarianism or to build castles in the sky. It is to emphasize what Susan George herself tells us “history suggests” — that wrenching crises can indeed give birth to revolutionary (and counter-revolutionary) events. And so, what distinguishes George and other reform-oriented leftists from revolutionary Marxists is not their supposed realism, nor their pious hopes that traumatic events can somehow be avoided. Rather it is their refusal to accept the elementary responsibility incumbent on all those who would lead the charge to “change the world” — to learn from the lessons of history and to build the political instruments needed to win real victories against capital.

I recognize that this argument will be seen by many as an appeal to “sectarianism” – which most radical-socialist leftists mistakenly view as the main obstacle in our time to building an effective, mass socialist movement. But sectarianism can be understood in different ways, and in my opinion the label is substantially inapplicable to Marxists who uphold the need to work within the mass organizations of the working class (in particular the trade unions), who are prepared to engage in united-front activity with other groups around issues of common concern, who do not refuse “on principle” to use electoral campaigns as a platform for socialist ideas, and who are willing to debate their leftist opponents in ways that do not preclude mutual understanding and principled collaboration. The conception that the defense of revolutionary Marxist ideas is *inherently* sectarian is a liberal and reactionary notion, one that should not be countenanced by any sincere socialist.

Above all, the key to the revival of Marxist socialism in the 21st century must be the reassertion of a genuine *internationalism*. In fighting for the ideas of Marx, Engels, Luxemburg, Lenin and Trotsky, revolutionary socialists must be concerned not only with building “national” organizations (which inevitably will face widely differing conditions) but an *international working-class party* that will incorporate its understanding of the *uneven* development of global class struggle into its strategic perspective. A genuine revolutionary realism must also recognize that the establishment of a revolutionary workers’ state in even one country in the world would do incomparably more to transform mass consciousness on a global scale than any amount of opportunist maneuvering conducted on national or local terrains by contemporary reformists.

So which country might I have in mind as a candidate for such a role? Actually, there are several. In their own ways, Greece, Spain, Venezuela, Bolivia, South Africa, India, and Sri Lanka all exhibit a combination of objective and subjective factors that seem favorable to a revolutionary upsurge -- though I hasten to add that the working class of none of them is very close to resolving its crisis of leadership.

However the country that excites my socialist imagination the most is China, and for two reasons. First, because its economy has a transitional or hybrid character, combining socialist and capitalist elements, and secondly, because it remains a “bureaucratically deformed workers’ state” in which colossal working-class struggles are unfolding, against both the ruling Stalinist oligarchy and burgeoning capitalist enterprise. In this connection, I’d like to quote a passage from my book, *Global Capitalism in Crisis: Karl Marx and the Decay of the Profit System* – a passage that resonates, I think, with the mission of York University’s new *Centre for Marxist Studies in Global and Asian Perspective*. In that work I wrote:

The future of China’s deformed workers’ state and “socialist market economy” remains very much in doubt.... But one thing is fairly certain: either the Chinese working class will settle accounts with the Stalinist oligarchy and usher in a revolutionary workers’ state committed to socialist democracy and working-class internationalism, or the oligarchy will continue to prepare the ground for a full-scale capitalist counter-revolution. In either case, China will emerge, for better or worse, as the foundry in which the destiny of humankind will be forged for a

considerable period to come.

China is presently the home of the world's largest and most militant working class, and there are good reasons to believe that its advanced detachments, those Chinese workers with the most highly developed socialist consciousness, will be looking to connect with and reanimate the best traditions of revolutionary Marxism. In my view, their quest to find a road forward to both defend the remaining gains of China's social revolution and advance the struggle for *world* socialism will in no way be assisted by the activities and ideas of Western reformists – purported leftists who desire above all a more perfect liberal democracy within capitalism; who sew illusions in pro-imperialist, economic-nationalist politicians like Bernie Sanders; who seek alliances with supposedly progressive elements of the capitalist class; or who want to revive the classical Social Democratic vision of a broad party that can be a home to reformists and revolutionaries alike. Still less will they be assisted by those Western socialists who write off the conquests of the 1949 revolution, who refused to defend Mao Zedong's China against imperialism on the grounds that it was “state capitalist,” or who now denounce post-Maoist China as both capitalist and imperialist.

For China to become a socialist beacon to the world, the vanguard of the Chinese working class must be encouraged to take up the principles, strategic precepts and historic programmatic conquests of revolutionary Marxism as the firm foundation of their future struggles. And this, in my opinion, will be much more likely to happen if would-be socialists in the West take seriously their own responsibility to re-forge a world

movement committed to that *same* revolutionary Marxist legacy.

Thanks to everyone for listening! I look forward to our discussion!