

Socialism as Movement versus Socialism as Theory

(Parts of a Polemic Currently in Progress within the Working Class Movement of Iran)

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...There is a significant difference between two approaches to socialism. One regards socialism as a theory and a guideline for action of "the working class party". This "party" is in charge of "guiding and leading the working class in a revolutionary struggle against capitalism, for the establishment of socialism"; whereas, to my understanding socialism *is* the working class movement which struggles against the miseries of today's human beings, aiming to go beyond a capitalist framework. The former approach views socialism, on one hand, as a mere theory that must guide the action of the "party", and on the other hand, something which should be set up or 'established' in the future. The latter approach views socialism as a practical-theoretical movement. In other words, in one view socialism is only a theory, and in the other socialism is the unity of practice and theory, that is, *Praxis*.

As both of these approaches to socialism claim themselves as the socialism of Marx (unless otherwise claimed), in order to find out the correctness or incorrectness of these approaches one must refer to Marx himself. Marx has a famous clause which plainly elucidates the

matter:

*Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence. (German Ideology)**

In the *German Ideology* as well as other works of Marx, one could bring more examples in which Marx defines socialism as a movement, and not a mere theory. Essentially, the socialism of Marx and generally his materialist conception of history were formed in contrast to the theoreticians and philosophers who sufficed to criticizing one idea with another. Marx did not establish his materialist conception of history as a pure idea against Hegel's, Feuerbach's and Young Hegelians'. He criticized socialists such as Saint-Simon, Fourier, Owen and their efforts for establishment of socialism as a theory, and knew their socialism as utopia. Marx considers that the upside-down and bourgeois theory is rooted in the upside-down world of capitalism, and in order to bring an end to such theory one must bring an end to this world:

It [the materialist conception of history] has not, like the idealistic view of history, in every period to

look for a category, but remains constantly on the real ground of history; it does not explain practice from the idea but explains the formation of ideas from material practice; and accordingly it comes to the conclusion that all forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into "self-consciousness" or transformation into "apparitions," "specters," "fancies," etc. but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug. (Ibid, p.189)

Therefore, contrary to the theoreticians and philosophers prior to him who were attempting to create only a correct consciousness; thus, only interpreting the world, Marx went beyond the realm of theory by claiming that the point is to change the world. He himself started the actual way of changing the world, namely, "the practical overthrow of the actual social relations". Marx's approach, contrary to the upside-down world reality, which consists of the practice and theory of capitalism, is not just a socialist theory. Rather, it is an actual and material movement in the name of socialism which will abolish that upside-down reality. Accordingly, Marx's point of departure for changing the world was not the socialist theory and attempting to establish it. Rather, it was organizing the workers, *i.e.*, the active and actual human be-

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ings. It is in this meaning that I refer to Marx: Marx as a theoretical-practical and a worker-activist of the working class movement, and not merely as a socialist theoretician. Otherwise, if I refer to Marx just as a theorist, I reduce socialism into a pure and abstract theory.

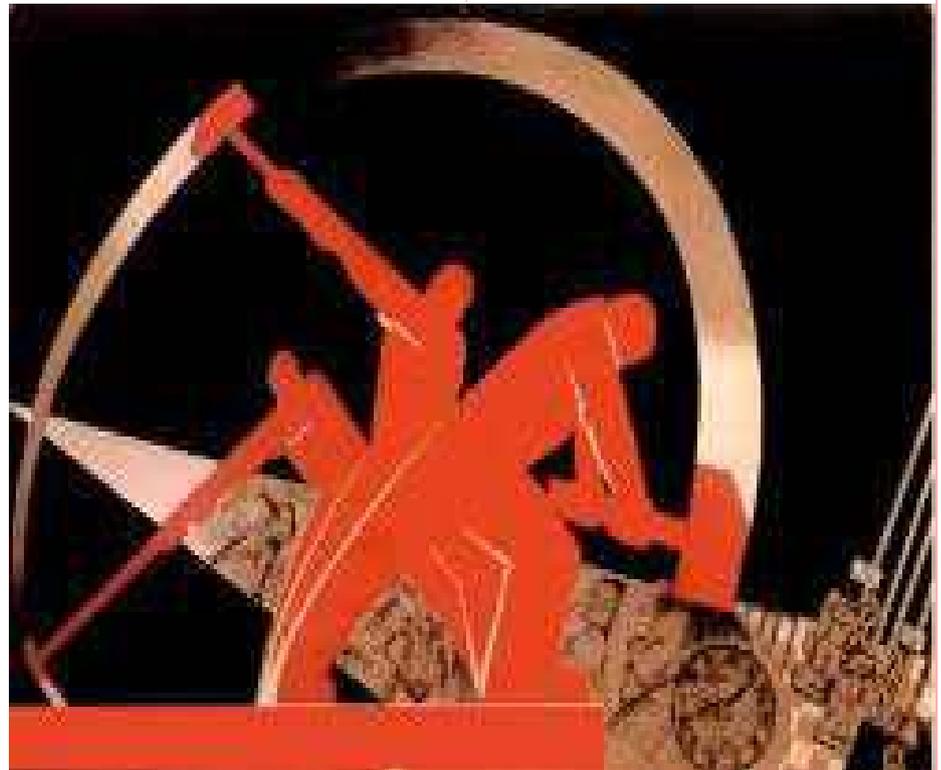
Based on this view of socialism, Marx did not consider that organizing the worker movement for changing the capitalist world is conditioned to changing the mentality of the worker masses. According to him, the change of the mentality of the worker masses under the rule of capital is essentially impossible, with the clear reason that until the worker masses are under the submission of capital, their mentalities too are under the submission of capital. He considers that altering the workers mentality on a mass scale is feasible only in a revolutionary process which takes place for changing the capitalist world:

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in rid-

ding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew. (Ibid, p.195)

If the alteration of the workers mentality on a mass scale is possible only within revolution, thus, to the same degree that the workers are acting for revolution, they would also create the possibility of the alteration of their mentality. As, due to various reasons, the levels of activity for revolution among workers are different, the levels of

conscious workers merely know their actual immediate practice, whereas the conscious workers, based on the education that takes place on the ground of the class struggle, go beyond this level of knowledge and recognize their surrounding world and how to change it. Thus, although the alteration of the working class mentality on a mass scale is possible only in a revolution, the consciousness of the forerunner sector of this class that is ac-



change in workers mentality, that is, the levels of their socialist consciousness, also become different. These levels of consciousness form a spectrum that begins from the most conscious workers and ends with the most unconscious ones. In this spectrum, the uncon-

ting for revolution, can be altered from an in-itself state to a for-itself one. I emphasize that this alteration of in-itself mentality to for-itself would only be possible in the process of a revolutionary activity, *i.e.*, in the process of struggle against

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capitalism. The example of intellect in a human infant can help elucidate this issue. An infant has an intellect in-itself. In other words, an infant is potentially rational. He or she is actually a human being, but is only potentially rational. To become actually rational and to alter the intellect from the state that is not recognizable for the infant to the state that can be recognized for him/her, he/she is bound to grow and be matured in the process of years of living in the human society. In the same way, a worker has a socialist consciousness in-itself. But the alteration of this consciousness from in-itself to for-itself requires organized worker's activity to change the capitalist system as well as the education which has to take place simultaneously with this activity. As much as this activity/education is promoted, the possibility of changing the mentality of the worker increases. Such education which is capable of altering the workers' in-itself consciousness to a for-itself, is only possible and effective on the ground and during anti-capitalist activity.

Therefore, in Marx's view, there is a real movement struggling to change the existing situation; within this movement all the workers are struggling for this change, the masses spontaneously and the forerunners self-consciously. What Marx calls communism is not only the pioneers but the whole of this mo-

vement, that is, both the worker masses who are struggling against capitalism spontaneously and the communist-activists who do the same thing self-consciously. Both the worker masses and communist-activists are the unity of practice and theory. However, among the worker masses this unity is in-itself and unconscious - that is, while they are struggling against capitalism, this system is not known to them in terms of theory - whereas in communist-activists the unity is for-itself and conscious. It is in this meaning that Marx, in *German Ideology*, defines communist as a practical materialist, and thereby emphasizes the self-conscious unity of theory (materialism) and practice in the communist human being.

Hence, socialist theory, as workers' class consciousness, whether in its unknown state in workers masses, or in its known form in communist-activists, is an inseparable part of the working class movement, and it is not something outside this movement :

"...a class which forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness..." (Ibid, p.195)

Also:

"Consciousness can never be

anything else than conscious existence" (Ibid, p.180).

Therefore, communist consciousness can only exist within workers; this consciousness though unrecognized by the working masses, is recognized by some practical materialist.

This view of Marx about class consciousness shows the invalidity of Kautsky's (and consequently, Lenin's) view that socialist consciousness is something which comes into being from outside and injected inside the working class. Such theory, based on the sectarian lefties who are inspired by Lenin's approach write their 'program', and build their "party", would not be a socialist consciousness. Rather, it would be some abstractions separated from the context of the living class struggle that, because of its abstraction indeed, is incomprehensible and unintelligible for the workers. This consciousness is formed based on the division of mental and manual labour and it comes from sources other than manual labour. Without a doubt, the separation of mental labour from manual labour, because of creation of a field in the name of mental or theoretical labour which goes beyond human being's consciousness in its immediate practice, is a step forward. But, this progress takes place inevitably as a separation from manual labour,

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and it is exactly this that transforms theory into an abstraction which practice has to obey or, according to Marx, the reality must adapt itself to it. This conception that Marx's socialism is a theory which is formed outside the working class and must be taken into the working class - that is, must be implemented in practice or the practice of the working class must adjust itself to it - emanates from the separation between mental and manual labour, a separation against which Marx's socialism, that is, the theoretical-practical movement of the working class, came into being. Also, Marx's socialism contains the criticism of the view that separates the leaders of the working class into "theoretical leaders", and 'practical leaders', a view according to which few workers are only thinking and the majority of workers only implement their thoughts. In Marx's view, each leader of the working class is a theoretical-practical activist. As I mentioned, while this unity of thought and action is in-itself for worker masses, for communist-activists it is for-itself. It is obvious that, accordingly, the role of leading and leadership of the working class struggle is the responsibility of communist-activists. But how?

The answer to this important question, as a matter of fact, is the chief subject of this debate, and again it depends on the commu-

nist-activists' point of departure: movement or theory? If, like Marx, we depart from the actual living movement which is struggling against the existing situation to overthrow it, then as forerunners who at the same time are representing the interests of the whole movement and attempting to organize this struggle, and thereby educating the worker masses on the grounds of this organized struggle as well as struggle against other non-worker views or tendencies inside the working class, we would strengthen the self-conscious aspect of the struggle against capitalism and make the working class ready for the abolition of wage-labour by seizing the political power. Thus, by departing from the movement (not theory), what is organized is not merely the forerunners of the working class but the whole movement that Marx calls communism. In other words, the organization that communist-activists must struggle for its building is nothing but the organized form of the working class movement. Whatever we call this organization, one thing is certain: it is nothing but the anti-capitalist and all-embracing organization of the working class. It is in this meaning that I believe that the anti-capitalist and all-embracing organization of the working class is a container for the establishment of socialism. As I mentioned, in this organization as

the organized form of the worker movement, although the majority of workers are actually struggling against capitalism, they are potentially conscious of this struggle. Consequently, the organized worker masses in the anti-capitalist organization remain vulnerable to different kinds of non-worker views and tendencies. The responsibility of communist-activists is to show the essence of these views and tendencies to the worker masses, and attempt to organize the whole masses, and not just the communists, against these views and tendencies. Among other things, this is one thing by which Marx differentiates communists from other tendencies within the workers movement. He says, in *The Communist Manifesto*, that one thing which distinguishes communists from other workers' parties (tendencies) is that in every stage of the workers struggle they represent the movement as a whole. The condition for the communists to represent the entire movement is that they do not form an organization separate from the worker masses but, by playing the role of the forerunners within the organization of the worker masses and attempting to transform the in-itself consciousness of mass workers to the for-itself one, try to make their goal and political strategy to the goal and political strategy of the whole workers movement. Without a doubt, this is not simple

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and needs a difficult and long-term struggle full of blood and bullets. However, it would be possible only with the presence of communists and worker masses within one anti-capitalist organization, because they both have a common material goal: communism. Communists, by organizing themselves separate from the anti-capitalist organization (one that contains only communists has no meaning but a separation of communists from worker masses) with this pretext that this organization would be a 'mixture of different non-workers and bourgeois views and tendencies; on the one hand, transform themselves into a sect and, on the other hand, leave the worker masses in the hands of the same non-workers and bourgeois tendencies and views. Thus, concisely, if communist-activists depart from the workers movement and the active existing individuals of this movement, that is, worker masses, they would promote the direction and leading of the working class struggle for the change of the world by way of the organized manifestation and crystallization of this movement, that is, the anti-capitalist organization of the working class.

But, if we depart from theory, we would inevitably put the role of leading the working class in the hands of the manifestation and crystallization of this theory, namely the 'working class party', which is in-

deed nothing but an organization separated from the actual socialism, that is, the social movement of the working class. According to this approach, the realization of the political and strategic goal of the working class would be the responsibility of the 'working class party' and the trade union would only do the economical struggle and utmost a non-revolutionary political struggle. Lenin, whom the possessors of this idea are usually inspired by his approach to the workers movement, calls the first organization as 'professional revolutionary organization' and the second one as 'workers organization' (*what has to be done?*).

I am working on an article where I will show the contradiction and estrangement of Lenin's approach towards the worker's movement with Marx's approach. Here, I mention just an example of this contradiction and estrangement. One of the most famous and indicating sentences of *What has to be done?* which the sectarian left has always used as its motto is this: 'Without a revolutionary theory there would not be any revolutionary movement'. This sentence, which is a concise statement of Lenin's approach to the relation of movement and theory, is in exact opposition to the following sentence of Marx in *German Ideology*:

"The existence of revolutionary ideas in particular period presuppo-

ses the existence of a revolutionary class."

In other words, the existence of revolutionary ideas of the working class in the particular period of capitalism presupposes the existence of the revolutionary class of proletariat. Therefore, the materialist approach of Marx to the history brings a conclusion exactly opposite to Lenin's view: Without a revolutionary movement there would not be any revolutionary theory. If Lenin had read *German Ideology* and particularly this sentence, he would have called Marx a pure economist. In Lenin's view, the revolutionary nature of the working class is restricted to the existence of the conscious element, which will show itself in the "working class party". And this is why he does not regard the spontaneous movement, or self-activity, of the working class as revolutionary and considers it as trade unionist...

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*All quotes of Marx in this text are from the following work:

Marx, Karl, *Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 2nd edition, 2000.

