

**Maurice Cornforth 1956**

# On the Theory of the Socialist Revolution

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**Source:** *Marxist Quarterly*, July 1956. Scanned and prepared for the Marxist Internet Archive by Paul Flewers.

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The socialist revolution consists of the entire process, on a world scale, through which the socialist mode of production is established and supplants earlier modes of production. Hence just as the bourgeois revolution continued through an entire historical period extending over many years, during which revolutionary changes took place in one country after another, so, it may be expected, will the socialist revolution.

I think it is useful to consider the socialist revolution in this way, because then we have to reflect on the characteristics of a long process in time, passing possibly through several different stages of development as it spreads and gathers momentum. If as participants in the socialist movement we can fill our minds with such an historical sense, then we can the better adapt our passions and hopes to reality, and the better understand our current political and economic problems.

The socialist revolution is the work of generations. There are brilliant successes in its long course, and also disastrous setbacks; ideas and methods which carried all before them give rise, as conditions change through their very agency, to confusions, dogmas and falsehoods; schisms arise, mistakes and even crimes are committed. Such has ever been the history of revolutions, and the socialist revolution proves no exception.

## The Principles of Marxism

Marxism is the theory of the socialist revolution. And considering revolution as an historical process, we should distinguish the fundamental principles of Marxism – those principles which we may expect to hold good all the time – from their consequences in policies and practices which we may expect to change from time to time; and from ideas and theories which, valid at one stage, in one set of circumstances, need to be revised when that stage is passed.

There are times of transition – and the present appears to be one of them – when it is necessary to review all the ideas and practices inherited from the past in order, in the light of facts and fundamental principles, to reject what is no longer applicable in them and

generally to correct and change them for use in the new conditions. The necessity of this may well make itself known in the form of a crisis within the movement, of the revelation of evils plain for all to see as consequences of the old ideas and practices. I think the revelations of the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened just such a crisis in the movement; and then the tragic and bloody collapse of a socialist government in Hungary came as a further warning that a change is necessary or we may pay a still dearer price. The revision then comes about as a bitter learning of lessons, a righting of wrongs, a conclusion forced on us by events, rather than as a calm process of scientifically deducing conclusions from premises.

What is fundamental and permanent in Marxism? What are those ideas we shall not revise, but in the light of which we shall revise other ideas? First of all, the statement of purpose, the goal of socialism. Secondly, the scientific proof of the historical necessity of that purpose. Thirdly, the demonstration of the means to gain it.

First, Marxism formulates the goal of the socialist revolution – the abolition of capitalist private property, the abolition of all exploitation of man by man, the social ownership of the means of production and their planned use for the benefit of the whole of society, leading to abundance and the brotherhood of communism.

Secondly, Marxism does not put forward this goal as a utopia, as a mere vision of what would ideally satisfy people's needs and make them all happy, but as a goal the practical attainment of which is made necessary by the actual conditions of modern society, and the posing and attainment of which in fact corresponds to objective laws of development operating throughout human history. The development of the social production of the material means of life in the last analysis determines the direction of social development as a whole; and if now the goal of socialism is placed as a practical objective, that is because only under a socialist economy can the contradictions of modern capitalist society be solved and the great modern forces of production be fully utilised.

Thirdly, the goal being set and its necessity and attainability proved, Marxism states the indispensable means to attain the goal – in other words, what social forces must be set in motion and what action they must take. Socialism will only be gained by waging the working-class struggle. The forces to gain it are the working class in alliance with all the working people. The condition for gaining it is the conquest of power by these forces. And to wage this struggle and achieve the conquest of power, the working class must have its own independent political party.

Of course, whole books have been written, and more need to be written, explaining, justifying and elaborating the principles of Marxism, and the materialist dialectical method which is employed in them. But the above seems to me their essence.

As the socialist revolution develops, it is clearly the job of Marxist organisations to conclude from the new facts what is necessary to be done in the light of their Marxist principles. And what we have perhaps especially to guard against is fixed ideas about the means for gaining socialism and for building it, that is, fixed ideas about the methods of working-class struggle, the nature and policies of a socialist state, and the nature and methods of work of working-class parties. In times of transition, we have to criticise and revise not our fundamental principles but the conclusions we draw from them. This in turn brings with it, and cannot be effected without, changes in sentiments, in moral ideas, in standards and attitudes.

## **Socialism in One Country, Encirclement and Coexistence**

The socialist revolution began with the conquest of power and the building of socialism in one country alone – and that not initially a leading industrial country but a relatively backward one, the USSR.

This was not how the founders of Marxism envisaged the beginning of the revolution, and so it presented and continues to present the need for radically new thinking by Marxists. Marx and Engels envisaged the revolution beginning in a group of the most advanced countries of industrial capitalism. Why it in fact began differently has been often explained, and especially clearly in some of Stalin's writings.

But it is perhaps worth noting that in this respect the socialist revolution has followed what appears to be a universal law of all revolutions – what may be called the law of revolution on the periphery. When a given mode of production is ripe for revolutionary change, the change does not begin at the centre but on the periphery. It was not at the centre of the slave empire that feudalism first came, nor at the centre of feudalism that capitalism first came, nor at the centre of world capitalism that socialism first came. Evidently the old system being well established at the centre makes it more secure there, and the new system emerges first in outlying places where the former system has penetrated and upset still older relations but not yet firmly entrenched itself.

The opening stage of the socialist revolution was, then, one in which socialism was being founded and built in a single country. And this single socialist power started from a position of backwardness and weakness, encircled by stronger and hostile capitalist powers. It was engaged, therefore, in a desperate struggle for very life. Its survival, and so the whole future of the socialist revolution, depended on the socialist power, together with

its supporters in other countries, being able to hold off capitalist hostility long enough for the socialist economy to be thoroughly established and rendered impregnable.

This was done (though at a heavy cost, the bill for which is still coming in). And so conditions have changed, amounting, as I shall maintain, to the beginning of a new stage of the socialist revolution.

The USSR has become a great power, industrially and militarily, well able to hold its own. The boundaries of socialism have been greatly enlarged, first by the inclusion of the People's Democracies of Eastern Europe, and second by the inclusion of China, developing rapidly as a great socialist power. The imperialist powers have been greatly weakened, partly by the territorial gains of socialism, partly by the collapse of two of them (Germany and Japan), and partly by the rising tide of revolt in their own colonies, protectorates and other spheres of influence.

In view of these changes, I do not think the old concept of encirclement is any longer adequate. One should rather speak of coexistence.

## **Socialism in Conditions of Encirclement**

In the conditions of encirclement, ideas and practices arose in the revolutionary socialist movement corresponding to those conditions. It therefore seems vital now to discuss what in them should be corrected and changed when new conditions have come about.

Of key importance, I believe, are problems connected with the organisation and policies of a socialist state.

The Soviet state was developed and had to be developed as in the first place an extremely centralised and coercive organ of power. The watchword was that of ruthlessness (Lenin often used this word) in the defence of socialism from internal enemies, in the elimination of the vestiges of capitalism, and in pressing forward the work of socialist construction. And from this a number of special features arose as characteristic of the first socialist state. The one-party system emerged, all other parties except the Communist Party being banned. A system was evolved of government by decree, with infrequent and short meetings of the elected representatives in the Supreme Soviet. A formidable political police organisation was built, with wide powers of arrest and execution. The party and government took on themselves vast powers of ideological direction and censorship, ensuring the virtual suppression of the expression in any form of anti-socialist ideas. Harsh things were done – for instance, the elimination after NEP of the small traders, the deportation of many former kulaks to remote regions, the crushing

of nationalist opponents of socialism in various national republics, and so on. All these are very well known facts, and were approved by revolutionary socialists at the time (and should still be approved retrospectively) as necessary in the circumstances.

The conditions of encirclement also affected the socialist movement throughout the world. The reformists were hostile to the whole Soviet state system, and so tended to line up with their own capitalists in anti-Soviet activity. The Communists, on the other hand, saw (and in this I believe we were and are absolutely right) the defence of the Soviet Union, this base of world socialism, as a first duty. If the Soviet Union went down, the cause of the working people in every land would suffer a terrible blow. Hence the Communists were staunch and uncompromising in the defence of the Soviet Union, supported its state system and policies, and refused by voicing criticisms or doubts to play into the hands of its enemies. In this period the Communist parties were closely bound together in the Communist International, and accepted the binding character of the International's directives. They maintained the strictest centralism and discipline, with a strict orthodoxy of doctrine, and were intolerant of doubters, deviationists or factionalists.

## **The Distortion of Socialist Policy**

It seems to me evident, as I have said, that with changing conditions the whole heritage of ideas from the encirclement period must be overhauled. But the readjustment which would in any case have been necessary has been rendered peculiarly difficult by the exposure of a whole series of mistakes, abuses and distortions of socialist theory and practice which began in that period, and are now associated with the name of Stalin. This makes the line of advance today dangerous and complicated. It is dangerous, because the horror aroused by the abuses makes many people lose their heads and become antagonistic to the Soviet Union and the very principles of Marxism. And it is complicated, because the task is not simply to remove the abuses and restore the old established ideas and methods of socialist democracy. It is also to examine the entire heritage of the past period in order by critical discussion to develop the ideas and change the methods for the new period.

The distortions of socialist theory and practice which occurred under Stalin are already well known. There was a growth of the power of bureaucracy in all departments of Soviet state activity. Although Stalin had written that it is the workers who rule, absolute power was more and more usurped by Stalin himself. With this grew the so-called 'cult of the individual', the cult that Stalin was infallible and decided everything – which, as Gomulka recently observed, tended to become not merely the cult of Stalin himself but of a whole series of his deputies throughout the hierarchy of government. The secret police was made independent of both government and party, and committed senseless outrages. The real

danger of hostile acts by enemies of socialism was exaggerated, and any expression of independent opinion began to be regarded as a hostile act, so that 'enemies of the people' were hunted down everywhere and any Communist was in danger of being branded as one. Many minority groups were persecuted.

The Stalin dictatorship was not the negation and overthrow of the dictatorship of the proletariat – it was a perversion, and one that can be corrected, leaving the people's power firmer than before. It was not a dictatorship directed against the masses, but was strong and long-lived because it enjoyed mass support. Stalin *did* lead the Soviet workers and peasants from conditions of degradation and ruin to being citizens of a powerful socialist state, with socialist industry and agriculture devoted to raising their standards, without exploiters, with a bright future before them and their children. Yet by the time of his death, the perverted dictatorship was already frustrating the further development of socialism. Aspects of Stalin's foreign policy were endangering the peace so vital to socialist progress, his home policy was leading to dislocations in agriculture and stifling the cultural life and democratic initiative of Soviet people.

If one reflects on Stalin's work as a whole, it is impossible to ignore the immense contribution he made to leadership in critical moments of the socialist revolution. On the basis of Lenin's previous work, he put forward those ideas on the tasks of building socialism in one country which enabled it to be built. Lenin had creatively developed Marxist theory to deal with the entire epoch of imperialism and of socialist revolution. Leninism is not restricted to one place or one time, but is the starting point for all subsequent Marxist-Leninist theory and practice. Stalin in one part of his work summed up the essentials of Leninism, in another part he dealt with the problems peculiar to the building of socialism in one country amid capitalist encirclement, and in yet another part he distorted and played false with socialist theory and practice.

## Dictatorship and Democracy

If we turn now towards the future, I think we must begin with the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat and the socialist state itself, and with the need to *restore* the conception of Marx, Engels and Lenin – that the dictatorship of the proletariat means the democratic rule of the overwhelming majority, means that the working people themselves take the running of society into their own hands and control it in their own interests.

Already when the Soviet state was first set up and it was clear how ruthless the dictatorship would have to be, Lenin emphasised that working-class government meant drawing more and more of the working people into the work of government at all levels;

and that the more ruthless the government, the more varied must be the forms of control over it from below. The development of the most varied methods of people's participation in government at all levels, of control by the people over every act of government, of the fullest responsibility of government to the people, of such leadership as consults the masses at every turn and helps draw forth their own action, their own initiative, on every issue – this is the essence of a socialist state. This is the very antithesis of the cult of the individual, the power of a bureaucracy, the terrorism of the political police.

The question of liberty and democracy is now a crucial one for the future of the socialist revolution. And the reversal of socialist principles by Stalin has given it an acute crisis character. The socialist revolution is the revolution of the working masses in their own interests, to end all exploitation and to end class-divided society. Hence the development and completion of this revolution is the same thing as the development of democracy and the completion of liberty. These are tasks set by history. And this fact manifests itself in a mass way, in Britain in particular, by the passionate concern of millions of people, and especially the youth, for democracy and liberty. They value these things, and will value nothing that does not proclaim them. They will resist being ordered around, however benevolent the intention. They are revolted by oppression, whoever does it and in the name of whatever principles it is done. Thanks to Stalinism, the Communists have done something to outrage these deep and just sentiments. That, I am sure, far more profoundly than the adverse effects of Cold War propaganda, is one reason why in this country Communism is making so little headway amongst those on whom its future must depend, the working youth and the students.

But the true aim of socialism is profoundly in accord with the sentiment for democracy and liberty – is, indeed, the only aim in which this sentiment can find fulfilment. The word 'socialism' is *more* than the name merely for a new system of economic relationships. So to restrict the meaning would be to kill the idea and aim. Socialism means the ending of exploitation of man by man, a society without class antagonisms, in which the people themselves control their means of life and use them for their own happiness. If the socialist state develops bureaucratically instead of democratically, then the aim is contradicted. These are things we must above all make clear, breaking with and condemning everything which has contradicted our aim, leading the fight for the democratic running of the British state and setting an example of democratic methods ourselves.

But are we yet doing this?

# Democratic Safeguards: Repression and Toleration

In the present period it becomes evident that overthrow by internal enemies and hostile powers outside is not the only danger by which socialism is threatened. The socialist powers have great internal strength and external support to withstand both internal and external attack. But such attack could still succeed if they become weakened from within, and their support outside becomes alienated, by a separation of the state from the people. This, surely, is the danger of which the events in Hungary gave warning.

Socialism does in practice produce its own dangers to itself, from the insidious tendency for the direction of the state to pass into the hands of a group which eludes the popular control. For the very concentration of social ownership into a single directing body does give a basis for bureaucracy to arise. (Lenin himself gave warning of this long ago.) Therefore the question of means and safeguards of popular control and of the expression of the popular will, is a vital one.

A socialist power must always adopt strong and vigilant measures to protect itself against counter-revolution. It must also adopt strong and vigilant safeguards for its own democracy. The question of such safeguards was even in the days of the bourgeois revolution uppermost in the minds of the greatest political thinkers. And Marxists might do well to return to and critically study some of their ideas, in order to learn a thing or two from them on how to guide the course of socialist states. Since violations of democracy took place, and even assumed extreme forms, during the period of encirclement, does not a major danger to the future of socialism now come from socialism itself being frustrated by failing to develop democratically?

To decide on correct and just policies, whether in economic, political or cultural affairs, is always difficult. It becomes next to impossible if the democratic method is not fostered. Parties, states and leaders are in their every word and action being judged by the working people. It is to this judgement that they must always look for correction. If once a leadership takes power to itself, ceases to foster free discussion, fails to criticise itself and is impatient of criticism from others, begins to mistrust the people's judgement and fails to place facts before them, assuming to itself the right to decide how much it is good for them to know – then the bonds of confidence between leadership and people are being severed.

Such problems are tied up with those of repression and toleration. For it seems reasonable to assert that the more firmly established socialism becomes, the less are



repressive policies required for its defence, the more are policies of broad toleration required for its enlargement.

Amid close encirclement the danger was pressing that, without a strict ideological and cultural censorship, the reactionary forces would take advantage of the least latitude to do serious damage. But with socialism established, another danger emerges, the danger that the stifling of new or unorthodox ideas or modes of cultural expression will begin to stifle socialist ideology and culture themselves – the new flowering of free life which is the final justification of everything socialists may do – and repel the new forces which should be coming in to reinforce socialist progress.

Hence it seems that a new toleration is required – the toleration expressed in the recent Chinese slogan: ‘Let all the flowers bloom.’

Ideas and culture cannot be produced to order; they must achieve their own growth in the minds and hearts of men. Fostered and allowed to grow, they will truly and adequately express the experiences and aspirations of the people, the arguments, conflicts, sentiments and conclusions of people on the move for a better way of life. If that is assured, then all the greater can be the forces mobilised to defeat the efforts of the people’s enemies.

These observations have application, I believe, in the socialist countries themselves. Some changes have already taken place there in the new period, and I think that, whether smoothly or by overcoming resistance, such changes will continue. I hope, however, that we Marxists in Britain will above all consider their application to our own affairs – to the way in which we run our own party, and the ideas and policies it puts before the labour movement and people.

## **Three Theories That Need Revision**

The former conditions of encirclement gave rise to three theories in which certain temporary features of the period were magnified into permanent and necessary facts about socialism and its relation with capitalism.

At the root of these theories was the idea that, while capitalism persisted, the stronger socialism grew the more menacing would the capitalist attack against it grow. Thus first, as socialism grew stronger the more would the resistance of the relics of capitalism in the given country increase and the more menacing would become the efforts of the outside capitalist powers to smuggle in their agents. Therefore far from dying away the class struggle would intensify under socialism. Second, the drive of the capitalist powers to destroy socialism by war would also increase, so that in the long run, and unless

capitalism was itself destroyed in time, a war became inevitable. Third, in view of the first two considerations, the 'withering away' of the socialist state, predicted by Marx, Engels and Lenin, could not begin.

I think it should be said that these three theories all require revision. When under socialism class antagonisms disappear there is no longer any basis for class struggle, let alone its intensification. The need for coercive policies to push ahead the building of socialism against opposition therefore diminishes, and an emphasis on coercion becomes not only unnecessary but actively harmful.

More than that. When the initial encirclement has failed, when socialism is already strong in one country and the capitalist powers are involved in insuperable difficulties which weaken their entire position, this affects the conditions of class struggle and the way socialism may be built in other countries which take the socialist road afterwards. The extreme danger to socialism of the resistance of professional, small capitalist and small farmer strata being reinforced by outside capitalist strength, is lessened. Therefore it is possible to do more to win these strata over and less to repress them, and so gradually to assimilate them into the growing socialist economy. Indeed, such a policy becomes the right one to minimise the danger to socialism from their resistance: that danger now grows if they are treated too harshly, lessens if the patient pressure is exerted to win them over. (Such a policy is already in operation in China, and is advocated in the British Communist Party's programme.)

Likewise in the relationship of socialist and capitalist countries, the growing strength of socialism and the growing difficulties besetting imperialism do not encourage but discourage the capitalists' attack. They continually probe for possibilities of attack, yet at the same time, and under pressure from the people of their own countries, are compelled to seek ways and means of coming to terms with socialist states. This implies that war is not inevitable.

Finally, the essence of the state is its function of coercion – yet the stronger socialism grows, the less is the exercise of this function required. The diminution of coercion was just what Marx, Engels and Lenin meant by 'the withering away of the state'. Stalin, in his well-known argument on this topic, said that the coercive power of the state would be less directed against people within the state's own boundaries and more against external enemies. Yet if this happens, does that not mean that the 'withering away' has actually begun? Stalin in fact, under cover of his correction of Marx, Engels and Lenin, strengthened the coercive power of the state all round, against alleged internal 'enemies of the people' too. Contrary to such a development, a socialist state *does* need gradually to shed its coercive functions and, as Engels put it, gradually to replace the government of persons by the administration of things and the direction of the processes of production. What was undoubtedly true in Stalin's contention was that, so long as capitalism remains,

the socialist state must maintain those institutions and powers necessary to resist attack. But does not this mean that the 'withering away' cannot be completed while capitalism remains, not that it should not begin? Is it not a conclusion about the limiting conditions under which the 'withering away' begins, rather than a denial of the process itself?

## The Perspectives Under Capitalism

The perspectives of socialist revolution in the imperialist countries are themselves profoundly modified by the successful establishment of socialism.

Yet one aspect of the situation is that within the perspectives of coexistence monopoly capitalism appears to be potentially *more* long-lived than was suggested by doctrinaire theories that it would either break itself in war or be overthrown as a result of its own economic collapse. That imperialism means war is evident every day; but there is no inevitability of *such* large-scale war as would lead to the violent destruction of imperialism – and if such a war did come, it could lead to the destruction of socialism too. In its internal economy, neither does it seem that there is an inevitability of *such* economic crisis as would lead to the collapse of the system and compel its replacement – just because the concentration of capital and the close link-up of monopolies and state make it possible for the monopolies to take their own measures to keep the system working.

What then is happening to monopoly capitalism? Its general crisis is developing through contradictions in which political and economic factors are intertwined. It is losing its colonial possessions, being forced step by step to come to terms with formerly subject peoples while continuing to try, at crippling cost, to put them down and maintain the old relations of colonial exploitation. The more it tries to put them down, the more does it suffer defeat and find itself forced in the end to come to terms. It is being forced step by step to come to terms with the new socialist world while continuing to try to keep the old hostility alive, backed by massive and ruinous armaments. The more it engages in hostile acts, the more cracks appear in its own anti-socialist front. It is being forced step by step to make economic and political concessions to the working people at home while it continues trying to intensify the methods of capitalist exploitation and preserve the privilege of the ruling few. And the more it takes the offensive against the working people, the more strongly do they resist and unite to win concessions.

Reaction retains its last cards to play – fascism and war. But so long as the people prevent, as they can prevent, it from taking these last measures, the more do opportunities arise for the labour movement, backed and urged forward by mass working-class action, to win increasing support and increasing power in the direction of state

affairs, and finally take over altogether. Then its task will be to turn the great monopolies into socialist organisations and bring the central control over economic and political power entirely into the hands of the working people.

Such perspectives envisage a broad class alliance of the industrial workers with all the white-collar, professional and even small capitalist sections in home policy, and, in world relations, a broad alliance of socialist with various forms of national bourgeois states. Such perspectives are not 'peaceful', in the sense that they certainly do include the likelihood of sharp conflicts and the possibility of violent ones.

Certain conclusions emerge for the new period. The Soviet path, the path followed by the Russian Revolution, is not the only path to socialism. On the contrary, having been followed once, it need not be followed again. According to the different conditions in different capitalist or colonial and formerly colonial countries, the different peoples must map out their own independent roads, converging on the common goal. In doing so, they are called on to maintain the constant international solidarity between different socialist movements, and between socialist movements everywhere and the countries where socialism is already established, on the basis of equality, exchange of ideas and criticisms, and independence of judgement and policies. They will adopt their own programmes, their own conceptions of the working principles of a socialist state in their own countries, and put them into practice.

If Britain advances to socialism, will it not be the mass British labour movement that will lead the way, make the decisions, take power and use it well or badly? And this will never be done without Marxist leadership. The test for the British Communist Party, as the vehicle of Marxism in Britain, will be whether it is able so to adapt its ideas, policies and organisation to the real conditions of struggle as to win its place in the leadership of British labour.

Socialism is not inevitable. What has been termed its 'inevitability' consists in this, that only through socialism can human progress continue. But there is not and cannot be any absolute deterministic inevitability in human affairs, since man makes his own history and chooses what to do. What is determined is not his choice, but the conditions under which it is made, and the consequences when it is made. The meaning of scientific socialism is not that it tells us that socialism will come regardless, but that it explains to us where we stand, what course lies open to us, what is the road to life.