

Remaking American Socialism: Building Progressive Unity Within the Left

by Manning Marable

A new political orthodoxy now unites American liberals and conservatives alike: the Cold War is over, the century-long conflict between capitalism and socialism has finally ended, with capitalism triumphant. The death of both Marxism specifically and socialism in general is now widely taken for granted. The proof of this, one African socialist theorist recently observed, is the example of the Berlin Wall. "The fact that pieces of the wall were sold rather than distributed freely," Wamba-dia-Wamba observed, "underlines the reality that Capitalism has won."

The apologists for capitalism now argue that the collapse of the Soviet socialist model was inevitable on economic, political and even moral grounds. They argue that freedom in the political sphere, the unfettered competition between parties in an electoral system governed by laws, is directly dependent on a market-driven economic system, or free enterprise. Such views are now advocated by many of the new political forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR. Last month, an economist elected to the Leningrad city council declared that his country must move quickly "from Marxism-Leninism, through socialism, to Reaganism."

These recent political upheavals have provoked sharp debates throughout the international left. The current debate over perestroika which appears to be developing within the Communist Party of the United States has erupted with much greater intensity in other Marxist-Leninist parties. The majority of the largest bloc within the British Communist Party has effectively disintegrated. Other parties have questioned their political ideology and in some instances have moved to rename themselves, identifying with the concept "democratic socialism."

Within the United States, the collapse of the Soviet socialist model in Eastern Europe, combined with the unexpected defeat of the Sandinistas in the 1990 election in Nicaragua, has created among many an unmistakable climate of self-doubt, disillusionment and even defection from the left. A small number of former leftists are saying that capitalism has been proven correct by historical events, that socialism was an illusion or a fraud. But the

vast majority of these leftists have not capitulated to Milton Friedman and Ronald Reagan.

Instead, some are taking refuge in what can be described as pre-Marxian forms of socialism. They say that classical Marxian theories, the labor theory of value and dialectical materialism, are no longer valid. In a manner reminiscent of the Frankfurt School of Marxists of the 1930s, those theorists who search for a humanistic socialism in the face of Stalinism look backward to Hegel and Kant, or to the writings of the immature Marx, and are resuscitating versions of utopian Marxism as "post-Marxism" or "post-modern socialism." Others have moved away from the very identification with the concept of socialism itself. Some argue that this is a tactical necessity, particularly within the United States, which has a political culture that is profoundly individualistic, entrepreneurial, and influenced by antisocialist discourse. Because of McCarthyism and anti-Sovietism, the argument goes, we need to advocate socialist objectives without actually calling ourselves who we really are.

A more sophisticated version of this position is what might be termed "radical democratic" theory, best represented by the work of theorists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis. They argue that Marxism neglects many nonclass forms of oppression, that "socialism" as a political terminology does not embrace the complexity of the goals they project for democratic change, and that liberal capitalism can be gradually transformed into a version of economic democracy, or a "postliberal society."

The problem with many of these formulations is that they obscure the fundamental factor which creates and recreates new economic and social contradictions within any capitalist society. That primary factor, which prefigures all others in the first instance, which sets the range of possibilities and outcomes, is the class contradiction. All capitalist market political economies have certain common characteristics: great concentrations of power in the hands of corporate minorities, great stratifications of poverty and wealth, and the utilization of racism, sexism and other factors to segment and divide working people.

Liberalism, by whatever term, seeks to humanize an inherently irrational, wasteful and inhumane social system. Liberalism tries to reduce, but not eradicate, great concentrations of poverty and homelessness. Liberalism attempts to bring representatives of women and people of color into positions of representation, but it does not speak to the transfer of power to oppressed social classes victimized by capitalism. Liberalism wants to interpret the problems of the world, and to create an environment of greater fairness; the point, however, is not to interpret but to change the world. In this "post-modern" period it is no longer popular to relate the truth, but the real name of the game under American capitalism is class struggle. It always has been, and so long as corporate capitalism dominates our economic and social system, it always must be. Our challenge is not to liberalize the existing system, but to radically transform it, building a democratic and humane society.

The dynamic and unprecedented changes in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe must be understood in relation to the problematic of revolution in the

twentieth century. Since the 1960s, there has been a series of political mobilizations against capital, which have assumed many different forms - such as the 1968 urban revolts in France, national liberation struggles in Latin America and Africa, the Black liberation movement within the United States, and China's Cultural Revolution. All of these movements were either negated by or accommodated to the interest of capital. Many of these failed social struggles were perceived as efforts to revitalize the political strategy of Marxism-Leninism. But the events of the past year indicate that the transition from capitalism to some viable postcapitalistic political economy is far more difficult to achieve than any of the classical theorists of Marxism ever anticipated.

The major strategy employed in these revolutions against capital - the establishment of a socialist dictatorship through a single party state, with state ownership of the central means of production - has failed. However, one can make the case that recent events in Eastern Europe were not revolutionary, but actually preempted the possibility of the construction of a genuinely democratic socialist society. Dissatisfaction with the bureaucratic communist regimes was so great among various social classes and political groups that when Gorbachev refused to guarantee the Brezhnev doctrine of military intervention to buttress local political establishments, these authoritarian states crumbled overnight. Working class outrage against bureaucratic privilege was mobilized by sectors of the petty bourgeoisie and consolidated into a reactionary social force capable of coming to state power. Yet their calls for freedom and democracy were not linked to the actual empowerment of the masses of working people, but rather to the construction of new forms of capitalist privilege. We can see clear evidence of this in Poland, where current projections of the unemployed exceed 2 million by January 1991.

But we have not witnessed the final act of this evolving political drama. Capital knows that the Eastern European and Soviet working classes will be bitterly disillusioned when they see exactly how market economics really works. In Latin America and Africa, there will be a massive political reaction to the imposition of economic austerity and cutbacks in social expenditures by conservative regimes. New forms of resistance to capital, strikes, labor unrest of all types, are inevitable. Capital's hope is to consolidate political formations and alliances with the most privileged social classes in the Third World countries, consolidating conservative political formations which will suppress working-class dissent.

In Eastern Europe, this scenario requires the revival of reactionary forms of ethnicism, anti-Semitism and social intolerance, which are utilized to divide workers. In Poland, such an authoritarian role may be played by the darling of the west, Solidarity's Lech Walesa. What has been largely obscured if not deliberately overlooked are the massive social and economic costs of waging the Cold War to the American people. Everyone knows that the Soviet Union is in crisis; but the United States is also in crisis. Our cities can be seen in the statistical realities of growing human suffering and inequality - three million homeless, 38 million without any medical insurance, millions in sub-

standard housing, millions of children denied proper nutrition, millions of middle-income families forced to work multiple jobs just to maintain a reasonable standard of living, collapsing bridges and highways due to inadequate support for the economic infrastructure, millions who are functionally illiterate or unable to work in a computer-oriented labor force.

This economic, social and educational crisis reinforces our belief that the socialist alternative continues to be both relevant and politically necessary. Our challenge is to rethink our socialist vision, advancing a political strategy which is more appropriate to the practical problems and realities of this historical conjuncture. But by remaking our political approach, we must not abrogate or abandon our intellectual and political identity as "socialists." How can we revitalize socialist politics and strategy for the 1990s and beyond? Briefly, I would suggest three points of departure, which should be explored seriously by the American left. First, instead of emphasizing electoral politics above all other political activities, we should refocus our organizing efforts on the practical problems experienced by the vast majority of working people and people of color in America's central cities.

The basic problematic for political engagement for the early twenty first century will be: What constitutes an economically productive, socially pluralistic and democratic urban community? I am not suggesting a hasty updating of Saul Alinsky's community organizing strategy. The current socioeconomic crisis in the cities is qualitatively different from the problems experienced a generation ago. Many basic conflicts with capital no longer occur in the "workplace," although struggles against job discrimination and for full employment remain absolutely critical. But most manifestations of oppression occur in what can be termed the "living place," or the urban, postindustrial community. Struggles over housing, health care, day care, schools, public transportation and economic development all revolve around the future of the postindustrial city. The urban poor and working classes, combined with the unemployed, are in effect second-class citizens, denied access to a quality of life which a minority of white, affluent Americans casually take for granted. Questions of public investment, reindustrialization, and the restriction of the right of capital to move across state and national boundaries, will increasingly affect millions of Americans. The left must be in the forefront in shaping the national agenda for the definition of what constitutes a humane, progressive living place.

Second, we must discard the idea that the Democratic Party can be "humanized," "reformed from within," or transformed into a labor party. This does not mean withdrawing support from progressives and liberals running for office as Democrats, or advocating a Third electoral party which has at this point little chance of winning at a national level. But we need to be more precise about the limitations of our political interventions within the Democratic Party, and constantly look for viable alternatives. The Democratic and Republican Parties have maintained a coalition government of national unity for decades, a Likud-Labour styled marriage, operating more from consensus rather than competition. Both national parties now have a vested in-

terest in maintaining this electoral partnership, which is the principal reason that the Democrats have ceased to function as a loyal opposition in anything but name.

Many Democrats recognize that they could probably win the presidency by the route advocated by Jesse Jackson – expanding the electoral base to include millions of nonvoting Blacks, Latinos, poor working-class voters, and advancing an American version of left social democracy, attacking the power of the corporations. This would force the Democrats into a truly antagonistic relationship with both the Republican Party and with virtually all elites in corporate America. It would also require the organizational restructuring of the party, something that the party's bureaucracy strongly opposes. Most Democratic leaders would rather lose a presidential election, and cooperate with a George Bush and Robert Dole in the Congress, than permit truly radical or potentially left-wing leaders to emerge within their ranks. Both parties are dominated by sections of capital, and have a fundamental commitment to private enterprise, regardless of the destructive human consequences for the majority of American working people.

Rather than playing cards with a pre-stacked deck, we must change the rules of the electoral game. Black and progressive activists must revive the traditions and tactics of nonelectoral political protest. This requires the development of institutions of creative resistance. For example, "freedom schools," open multiracial academies held during late afternoons and on weekends for secondary-school and college students, could offer a public protest curriculum. Learning how to organize street demonstrations, selective buying campaigns, and civil disobedience, and reading about the personalities and history of American protest would help to revive the radical consciousness of this generation of youth.

Changing the rules requires innovations in the electoral process itself. The traditional plurality system in American elections gives the victory to the candidate with the most votes. This system is not only easily manipulated by corporate interests, which coopt both major parties and suppress Third Party efforts, but by its very nature it also manipulates public preferences into predictable outcome. In multicandidate, citywide elections, in which minority constituencies represent one-third of the total vote or less, it becomes virtually impossible to elect candidates who represent these interests. Two results are predictable. Either the turnout rate of Blacks gradually declines in national elections, which has occurred for the past fifteen years; or candidates emerge who are more conservative, thus politically palatable to the white upper-middle class and corporate interests. A third, better option would be to restructure voting procedures which would permit minority interest to be expressed democratically.

Civil rights attorneys in several states have successfully pushed for changes in local elections which would give each voter several votes in each multicandidate race. The votes could be clustered behind one candidate, or shared in blocs with coalition partners. The result would be that minorities and working-class constituencies would have a much better opportunity for

winning authentic representation in citywide races, yet this system doesn't "discriminate" against white majorities. The left has to be in the forefront of campaigns to democratize the electoral process.

Thirdly, the American left must rethink its current organizational forms, its political language, general strategy and even its historical memory, if it is to remain relevant to the struggles ahead. We must begin by asking ourselves, what has given historical force to the idea of socialism? Why have so many millions of activists fought for this nebulous political concept, which has generated both constructive accomplishments as well as monumental crimes, and which now for many in the West seems abstract and hopelessly irrelevant?

The expression of any politics presumes a set of values. Within the socialist idea is a core of egalitarian and humanistic values: the human right to creative, productive work, the right to accessible and dependable health care, the right to decent housing, the right to universal public education, the freedom from oppression based on race, gender and ethnicity, the elimination of great concentrations of power and privilege in the hands of a tiny minority, and the democratic empowerment of those who historically have experienced the burden of exploitation and oppression.

The political expression of these values has created a number of political formations. Some who share these values have called themselves Communist or Marxist-Leninists; others have joined democratic socialist organizations or labor parties; and still others have belonged to a host of formations inspired by the writings and political examples of China's Cultural Revolution, Leon Trotsky, C.L.R. James, or others. Once political organizations are created, they generate their own unique internal dynamics, inner prerogatives which help to perpetuate the formation and those personalities in leadership positions. To justify their continued existence, formations emphasize their distinct theoretical and programmatic differences with other groups which share their general outlook. This pursuit of political purity fragments any possibility for cooperative relations between groups.

The left can no longer afford this type of destructive sectarianism. The political events which once divided the international working-class movement in the early twentieth century are being rapidly superseded by the new historical conjuncture. Before the twenty-first century, it will become less important whether one belongs to the Democratic Socialists of America, or the Communist Party, or any other socialist organization, than to grasp and build upon those basic principles which unite us, which give our political practice a creative vision and progressive orientation, which challenge the system of power and capitalist privilege in this nation.

We must ultimately look forward to a day when there will be a single, democratic and pluralist socialist formation in the United States, a national organization with the capacity to influence millions of Americans. It would be based on a common program of Marxist principles and politics, drawing upon the positive elements of both Marxism-Leninism and social democracy. But in the immediate years ahead, diverse elements of the left must engage in intense dialogues, identifying areas of common political concern, and con-

structing practical unity by joint activities.

The Communist Party has taken the view for many years that the development of "left-center" unity is the key to building progressive struggles and movements, and this strategic approach is correct. But the "left" does not simply comprise the Communist Party alone. Communists and social democrats alike must be challenged to transcend their sectarian habits, and to reach out to each other in the spirit of cooperation and self-criticism. I am not proposing a rigid timetable for this process of left regroupment. Years of intense political discussion would surely be required, with many practical problems that would have to be addressed. The American Communist Party has its own unique organizational history and a rich legacy of struggle, particularly with the antiracist and labor movements.

Members of the Democratic Socialists of America, particularly those close to the Democratic Party, would have to overcome years of anti-Sovietism and anti-Communist thinking. Both formations would have some difficulties relating to militants who had formerly belonged to the Socialist Workers Party, or to activists who were part of the new Communists movement of the 1970s. There are ancient, personal animosities and political grievances going back decades between individuals within similar groups, which in some instances will never be bridged. We can only respond to these realities by reminding our comrades of the observation by C.L.R. James: "Revenge has no place in politics."

At this preliminary stage, the call for regroupment and rethinking is essentially the recognition that our political conjuncture has been changed fundamentally by recent events; that the old political and organizational categories of the past century no longer adequately reflect these latest trends; and that the dynamics of capitalist exploitation within this country still require the existence of an active, militant, Marxist left. Unity, if it occurs, must evolve dialectically, through the common participation of various groups in political conferences, publications, the construction of institutions and political campaigns. Regroupment also suggests that critical elements of both Marxism-Leninism and social democracy are essential as the basis for the new unity.

Marxist-Leninists in America were far more successful than social democrats in building progressive movements among the unemployed and in labor in the 1930s and 1940s. They made impressive contributions to the mass democratic struggles against racial segregation. Communists recognized the critical importance of national liberation struggles in Asia, Latin America and Africa, and were crucial in mobilizing Americans against apartheid. But these strengths were undermined by the Marxist-Leninists' tendency to devalue the process of democratic decision-making, and to rely on authoritarian methods. The Party not only refused to work cooperatively with others who called themselves Marxists or socialists, but actively attacked them.

Conversely, socialists in the Norman Thomas – Michael Harrington tradition had a healthy respect for political pluralism and ideological diversity, and recognized that the vital link between democracy and socialism destroyed

by Stalinism was central to their definition of politics. Yet the social democrats tended to relate to the interests of labor leaders more so than to the concerns of the rank-and-file; they did little to develop links with people of color domestically, and did not comprehend the importance of supporting national liberation struggles internationally, as part of the larger struggle for socialism. Democratic socialists underestimated the repressive capability and characteristics of the capitalist state.

A synthesis of these strengths from each political tradition could form the foundations for a far more effective national political movement for socialism, if we agree to enter into a protracted process of practical collaboration and discussion. From this process could develop a theory of revolution which is truly organic and appropriate to the unique conditions of the United States.

Finally, we must constantly return to the challenges which exist in our own society today, and which will exist in the twenty-first century. Does capitalism have the capacity to end racism and sexism, to abolish hunger and illiteracy, to eliminate homelessness and unemployment, to reconcile vast disparities of wealth and income between antagonistic social classes? No way. Unless we consolidate a national formation with sufficient numerical strength in membership and political clout, which openly and unambiguously calls for socialism, we will become increasingly marginalized and isolated from the broader currents of protest.

We must cease looking backward, mired in outdated political feuds and formulations, and grasp the new challenges and opportunities which may exist. We must, in short, dare to have historical imagination, and dare to be Marxists. If we do so, the so-called death of socialism in 1989–1990 will be seen in retrospect as a detour, rather than its demise. Socialism once more can be the vision of the future.