

# THINKING LIKE A COMMUNIST

# THINKING LIKE A COMMUNIST

State and Legitimacy in the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba

# TONY SMITH

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## For

Charles, Miles, Robert, Roger, Ron, and Stanley

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# **Preface**

My interest in communist thought grew out of contact with Marxist and Leninist thinking in studies I was doing on the character of nineteenth- and twentieth-century European and American imperialism. Because of its ability to mount a unified theory of imperialism, one that connects events in the industrial "core" to the late-industrializing "periphery," Marxist analysis has long held an important position in this field. What struck me as basic to the comprehensiveness of the Marxist interpretation of Western imperialism, however, was its implacable logic, its reduction of important independent influences on the course of history to the narrow logic of socioeconomic categories of analysis, and its fierce moralism. If this comparative study of communist thinking appears at first to have its antecedents in investigations that are only marginally concerned with its principal themes, it should on closer inspection soon show a common foundation.

I was particularly helped in the writing of this book by two seminars at the Lehrman Institute, organized under the energetic guidance of its director, Nicholas Rizopoulos, ably assisted by Thompson Bradley, Michael Mandelbaum, and Linda Wrigley. I would like to thank those who participated as well as Donald Klein, Lucian Pye, and Betty Burch for their comments on China; Sally Terry for her observations on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe; and Richard

#### PREFACE

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> Tony Smith November 1986

# THINKING LIKE A COMMUNIST

# Introduction

Only he is a Marxist who extends the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat. This is what constitutes the most profound distinction between the Marxist and the ordinary petty (as well as big) bourgeois. This is the touchstone on which the real understanding and recognition of Marxism should be tested.

-Lenin, State and Revolution (1917)

For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?

-1 Corinthians 14:8

Marxism-Leninism, or communism, as it is more popularly known, is the most important ideological force of the twentieth century. Today at least one-third of the world's population lives under communist governments, while tens of millions more from lands as diverse as Italy and India explicitly subscribe to the communist creed. When the history of our century is written, the communist revolutions in Russia, China, Cuba, and Vietnam will surely emerge as its central political event, every bit as much as the rise of the middle class, and with it the growth of democracy, and the global spread of industrial capitalism, was the hallmark of the nineteenth century. Whatever one's political beliefs, one cannot be indifferent to the worldwide expansion of this militant ideology.

Acting like a communist presupposes thinking like one. The purpose of this book is to provide a brief, readable account of what it means to think like a communist. A number of excellent studies on communist history and ideology already exist, of course, but these works are usually intended for specialists. They are therefore either too limited in scope

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(treating only a specific country or period) or too exhaustive (covering matters in such detail that the "big questions" of general interest are often obscured) for the general reader or student. By contrast, most introductory books stay too much on the surface of things, content to convey a certain amount of information or opinion without penetrating more deeply into the substantive issues. This book's intention is to convey a sense of the "family tree" of communist ideology, demonstrating the common core, the decided family resemblance, that exists in the communist argument wherever it appears. At the same time it seeks to make allowance for the obvious diversity that exists among communist states and for changes that can take place in a single country over time.

Where to begin? In order to see the unity within the variety of communist thought, we want a single theme that draws together this school's principal arguments. Communist thought itself would suggest that we look for the core of a political ideology in the justification of the institution it holds central to its own identity—that is, that we relate a set of ideas to its "material base". For communism, this institution is the party. organized as the political vanguard before the revolution and as the state thereafter (even if in formal, operational terms the state and the party are sometimes distinguished from one another after the revolution). In communist terms, this means that we should focus our study on the form that the state was to take after a socialist revolution. For Marx this was to be "the dictatorship of the proletariat"; his followers have variously called it "people's democracy," "people's republic," "all people's state," and the like. As Lenin put it in 1919, "One may say without exaggeration that [the dictatorship of the proletariat] is the most important problem of the entire proletarian class struggle." For Lenin and his followers, the revolutionary state controlled by the party represented the only concrete organization that could translate Marxist theory into historical practice. Just as the state quickly became the central reality of life under communism, so the doctrine justifying such a state and its ambitions became the center of gravity of communist thought, making a claim so powerful

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that virtually all other elements of communist thinking had to be integrated into it.

The argument determining the character of dictatorship of the proletariat depends on a common set of assumptions, concerns, and modes of analysis, all of which are distinctively communist—be it of the Soviet, Chinese, or Cuban variety, or of the type that is not in power, as in Italy or India. By focusing on it, we can discuss communist ideology in a historical and comparative fashion. This approach respects the unity of communist thought but does not expect that we shall everywhere at every moment find it exactly the same. Accordingly, the first three chapters of this book lay out the essential assumptions of the communist argument and indicate how they were developed over time, initially in the writings of Marx and later in their reformulation and application by Lenin in the course of bringing revolution to Russia. The next three chapters trace the various expressions of these ideas in China and Cuba, concluding with a comparative analysis of variety and change in communist thought.

Obviously, a book of this length cannot offer final answers to all the questions it raises, but it should prove able to offer a useful framework for analyzing many of them. To repeat, the approach is that of comparative history. The basis of this method is to establish by an historical account the importance of a particular communist doctrine—that justifying the organization and power of the communist state, which Marx first called the dictatorship of the proletariat—and the mode of its transmission throughout world communism. Such an approach does not deny the existence of diversity and change; indeed, it seeks them out as indications of the unique character of the specific regimes existing within a comparative framework. But it is assumed that this diversity and change are limited by boundries of the communist argument itself. These boundaries are reinforced, to be sure, by the political institutions that the form of thinking has created and that now preside over the defense of orthodoxy, but they are also present in the structure of the original argument.

This discussion of the comparative method, to which we

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will return in the final chapter, may be of only marginal interest to the general reader, who should be reassured that the overriding concern here is to describe and analyze a particular form of political argument. I have attempted to write a book that presupposes no specialized knowledge about communism. One caveat is nonetheless in order. Because communism is a composite of Marx's theoretical writings and Lenin's adaptation of the doctrine to the Russian experience, the book must be read through from start to finish and not selectively. It would make no sense, that is, to read the chapter on Lenin before that on Marx or to take up the chapter on Mao before completing the three preceding chapters. The communist argument took shape gradually over time, by conscious design and by the force of its own internal logic confronted with social reality. The best way to grasp this kind of thinking is thus to follow the process through which it reached full force