

MARXISM AND SOCIALIST THEORY

Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel

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Vietnam

Neither high nor very far.
Neither emperor, nor king.
You are only a little milestone,
Which stands at the edge of the Highway.
To people passing by
You point the right direction,
And stop them from getting lost.

You tell them of the distance
For which they must still journey.

Your service is not a small one.
And People will always remember you.

Ho Chi Minh

**To the Memory of Herbert Marcuse
and in the Spirit of his Life and Work**

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INTRODUCTION

The historical locus of the revolution is that stage of development where the satisfaction of basic needs creates needs which transcend the state capitalist and state socialist society.

Herbert Marcuse

In this first volume of the set entitled *Socialism in Theory and Practice*, we will deal with theory. An introductory chapter focuses on many of the philosophical problems associated with doing science in general and, in particular, social science and historical theory. It sets the stage for the work to follow. Next, the second chapter discusses the contributions of a number of contemporary Marxist theorists and presents the main contours of our own overall theoretical approach to understanding history and social change in a totalist manner. It provides the conceptual underpinning of the more critical and detailed discussions to follow.

There are then four chapters dealing in sequence with political, economic, kinship, and community theory. Each addresses *certain* of the predominant schools of thought, criticizes them, and elaborates our alternative perspective. These discussions are not meant to address *all* alternative left theories nor even to address any one in *complete* detail. Rather, by dealing with the main features of the most popular theories we hope to illuminate much of the texture and advantage of a totalist approach. Furthermore, we single out certain popular Marxist theories for more detailed treatment because their concepts—by and large—dominate the usual discourse about socialism and also serve to legitimate certain basic beliefs about socialism which we must overturn. These critical discussions are enjoined therefore, not solely in relation to the new theories put forth in this volume, but also as a basis for our criticisms of certain visions of socialism and our argument for a new socialist vision next volume.

Indeed, the *motivation* of this book, *Marxism and Socialist Theory*, is not at all theoretical. Rather, we are first concerned with *what is to be done* with the theory we are trying to elaborate. It is the second volume of the set, *Socialism Today and Tomorrow*, which provides our motivation for the effort undertaken here. In it we first present a very readable summary of the positive theoretical lessons of this volume and then proceed to three historical case studies: the revolutionary experiences of the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. Each is treated in a major chapter and each is addressed in the framework of our overall theory including discussions of politics, economics, kinship, and community. Part One, including the theoretical presentation and three historical case studies, closes with a summary of the overall results and an argument motivating the immediate task at hand: elaborating a workable and desirable socialist vision for contemporary revolutionary movements. This vision is then presented in Part Two which deals sequentially with each of the four spheres of social life mentioned above. In these four chapters on socialist visions for economic, political, kinship, and community spheres of daily life we also address certain questions of socialist transition. Finally there is a discussion of the whole socialist transformation—how each sphere relates to the others in a whole—and then a concluding chapter titled “Neither Leninism nor Social Democracy” which draws certain strategic conclusions for the decade ahead.¹

The Need For A New Vision

In our view, to constitute an effective movement for social change in the U.S. leftists must develop both a broad vision of what it is we desire to create and a comprehensive explanation of the inadequacies of “existing socialist” societies. First, people’s motivations and their abilities to believe in their own ultimate potential depend upon reasoned belief in a goal, as does the task of elaborating a workable strategy. Second, the idea that “workers have nothing to lose but their chains” and that they will therefore be willing to struggle without a clear purpose is archaic. Instead, citizens of modern capitalist societies do have certain comforts and have generally come to believe that there is no possible way everyone could have substantially more or better. A reshuffling is

considered possible, but not a change that makes almost everyone better off, much less one which is egalitarian, just, and liberating. So, given this view, why should one take serious political risks? Given, as many believe, the relatively little one can hope to gain, why work for social change at all; why risk losing what advantages one may already have?

This view, not unreasonable given the pervading atmosphere in our society, is a principal impediment to developing a serious movement for socialism. Until socialist relations are described in enough detail to demonstrate their feasibility and human content, few clear thinking people will commit themselves to activism. "Dissatisfaction is easy to have, widespread everywhere, and no doubt better than nothing. . . . But what road leads from the initially psychological state of dissatisfaction to revolt?" Ernst Bloch answers his own question: "Dissatisfaction is not enough. One must know not only what one does not want, but also what one wants."² Without vision, activism requires a "leap of faith," which helps explain the almost clerical sectarianism of many Western leftists. Furthermore, without clarity about where we wish to go it is impossible to develop intelligent and coherent strategies for getting there. If our organizations of opposition, our consciousness and culture of resistance and our newly elaborated values are to move us toward socialism, then we must have a reasonable vision of the new society here and now, even as we begin to nurture socialism's roots in the present. And so we see the dual need for studies about socialism as it could be in the United States: for motivation and confidence, and to gain knowledge useful for the task of creating a new socialist strategy.

But why must we criticize existing models and established societies that call themselves "socialist"? For the most part they do not define where we wish to go, and with some important exceptions their history does not offer cause for hope and motivation. As a result these countries must be discovered as something other than socialist. Either that, or "socialism" will not be on the banners behind which a United States left marches. For insofar as the claim that these societies are "socialist" goes unchallenged, their authoritarianism raises a serious impediment to developing activist socialist movements in the capitalist world. And rightfully so, for there is no point in taking the risks of revolution in order to establish a new form of inequality. With regard to our spending substantial time

criticizing other people's *ideas*, as Alvin Gouldner argues, "theory-work is not done 'just by adding another brick to the wall of science' but often involves throwing bricks as well; it not only involves paying one's intellectual debts but also (and rather differently) 'settling accounts.'"³

It is ironic that many Marxists hold that discussing future possibilities and aims is automatically utopian. They proclaim the need for sober scientific analysis yet preclude by fiat thought about future aims. They fail to see that a "vision" is prerequisite to effective criticism of the present. They fail to see that knowledge of where you wish to go is as critical as knowledge of where you start from, and that positive desires are as important to socialist motivation as hatred of current oppressions. Yet this denigration of discussion of future possibilities is slowly fading into eclipse. At a large 1977 conference organized by the Italian group *Il Manifesto*, leftists from both East and West Europe assembled to discuss "existing socialism" and possibilities for change in both the East and the West. Setting the tone in her opening address, Rossana Rossanda said:

But I do want to say this: If the societies of Eastern Europe will not change without revolution in the West, there will be no revolution in the West without a thorough critical examination of the experience of the societies of the East. To ignore them, to draw back, not to get involved, would mean to refuse to understand what kind of society we want and will be able to construct here. It would even mean to renounce political theory itself. We must not forget that in the long and eventful evolution of the 'real socialist' countries—sixty years since October, more than thirty since the birth of the people's democracies, nearly thirty since the liberation of China, nearly twenty since Castro spoke of 'Socialist Cuba'—more than a mere hope has been shattered. The very idea of socialism, not as a generic aspiration, but as a *theory of society*, a *different* mode of organization of human existence, is fading from view. And here we come to the most difficult point of this discussion in the left: we must ask ourselves not whether these societies are unfree, but whether they are unfree *because* they are socialist or *because they are not socialist*. And if they are not socialist, what are they? There are those who deny that the question itself is legitimate.⁴

It is with Rossanda's spirit that we embark on the historical and theoretical tasks of these volumes. It is against those who deny the importance of such self-assessment by socialists that we make the claim that to ignore questions of what is and what isn't socialism is to ignore a chief problem of socialist revolution in the present.

Then what of the final question asked earlier: why haven't we focused solely on economics thereby attaining more detail while leaving other subjects for treatment elsewhere by people better equipped to the task?

A Totalist Approach

In our view the sharp division of analysis into myriad separate "disciplines" often seriously impedes clear understanding, not only of any "whole," but even of its component aspects. In our society social divisions occur along more than class lines, and these divisions affect all sides of life including the way people ask about and understand the world. Depending upon one's position in society, one develops a different view and has different experiences and needs. The understanding of a person who identifies first as a black, a woman, a worker, a Native American, a gay man, a professional, or a citizen each has a claim to legitimacy. Yet however relevant to a specific purpose, no such view is complete unto itself. From different life positions, different world views and theories emerge and they reflect different interests, sensitivities, values, and insights. Each reveals certain truths, but always less than the whole truth. On the left, some examples of such particularist theories are feminism, Marxism, nationalism, and anarchism.

A partitioning of perception and of contributions to our understanding due to different constituencies developing different theories exposes reality to diverse angles of investigation. Yet there must also be some means of social movements forming around a holistic understanding rather than only one or another partial understanding generated by a single constituency.

Coming toward society from a kinship, economic, community, or political perspective, an individual or group may develop a rich but partial understanding. To the extent these partial understandings can be encompassed in a larger whole, we believe this whole will be much more useful than the simple sum of its parts and

that moreover the insight of each part will be enhanced as well. For example, socialist-feminism aims to be much more than a simple juxtaposition of socialism and feminism bringing new insights about both class and gender in our society. Class analysis, for example, is immeasurably enhanced by the new recognition that the economy cannot be understood purely from an economic perspective. Once insights from sexual, political, and cultural analyses are "infused" into the very roots of the economic view that view becomes more than it was before. And a similar process can also enhance feminism, nationalism, and anarchism even in their analyses of the family, the nation, and the state.

The different circumstances of social actors in our society thus yield a variety of left theories including orthodox Marxism, radical feminism, nationalism, and anarchism. How are we to approach this "menu"? One way is to assume a favorite view is basic and the others derivative and relatively less important. This yields either a strict monist orientation, where one factor causes all others or a more pluralist view where many factors are operative but one is "more equal" than the others. Another orientation is to juxtapose all the theories, arguing that they are separate pieces of a whole and must all be employed in turn depending on the problem to be addressed. Here the views are considered "complementary" and equal but the diversity is not a first step toward synthesis. Finally, one can agree that the views are often complementary but still feel that they must interpenetrate, and that there must be an encompassing orientation that embodies all four perspectives yet is nonetheless much more than their simple sum. This last view is ours and is elaborated in considerably more depth in the first chapter of this book.

Indeed, the first two chapters of this volume are quite abstract dealing with epistemology and general theory and the following four chapters are primarily theoretical as well. They assess different theoretical formulations and present a variety of new alternatives. But so far our argument in this introduction motivates a discussion of historical experiences and of social visions. It suggests need for a total approach. Why then focus on theory? Why can't we jump in to the practical analysis without a long abstract detour?

Theory can be pursued for pure reasons: its beauty, curiosity, or the pleasures of intellectual work. However, with regard to social and political theory our motivations are much more pragmatic. To assess a country's institutions or to say what kind of social setting

we'd prefer to live in in our own future, we find theory an absolute prerequisite. It tells us society's most important attributes. It tells us how different attributes together form the whole and how different features of specific institutions influence the overall character of a society. Indeed, depending upon one's theory, one assesses history and thinks about human potentials in different ways. Therefore, though theory may be more difficult than description and less exciting, we mustn't leave it to others as if we have no interests in how it is developed. A detailed historical analysis is generally more readable than a discourse on concepts and their interrelations. Yet to do good analysis requires good theory and in turn the elaboration of good theory requires serious conceptual discussion, however difficult this might be.

Armed with the theories we critique in this volume, in our opinion even the most diligent analyst will elaborate less compelling analyses of the Soviet, Chinese, and Cuban revolutionary experiences than socialists need. Armed with these insufficient theories, this same analyst will also elaborate only a flawed vision for the future. It is a simple notion: if you use an inferior tool you will get inferior results. If you have an incorrect theory of how societies work and try to repair a society or to design a new one, you will fail. And a prerequisite to creating a new theory which can lead to success will usually be a successful critique of inadequate prior theory.

As a result, in this volume, we are going to discuss theory. Our historical examples will only provide explanation and punctuation for theoretical arguments. As mentioned above, the first two chapters are the work's most difficult. In the first we focus on broad, abstract issues of methodology and philosophy and mastery of this chapter is not necessary for understanding the rest of the volume. Indeed, many readers will find that even given a cursory reading the first chapter will serve as a good introduction but that then it will flow much more easily and return more for the effort if read more carefully later as a conclusion to the whole volume. Further, readers who have little background in the physical sciences should not be deterred by the first chapter's arguments based on analogies with physics. For despite little familiarity with physics these can be easily understood so long as one doesn't get sidetracked from the structure of the overall argument to worrying over the full meaning of some of the allusions. For those who are familiar with the physics, however, hopefully there will be added enjoyment in the examples.

The difficulties of the second chapter, in contrast, stem from a different source. For in this chapter we try to argue for a totalist theory by describing its overall contours all in one place. This makes for some dense writing and also for a presentation which leaves many gaps which can only be filled in the succeeding four chapters. Another difficult part of the second chapter is the brief introductory account of the theoretical approaches of Raymond Williams, Jurgen Habermas, and Louis Althusser. This section is also "rough going" and while it situates our efforts and should be a useful introduction to these theorists for those interested in their work, it too is not a prerequisite to understanding the rest of the volume. Finally, the last unusually dense section runs for about twenty five pages at the outset of chapter four on economics. As the material appears elsewhere with more examples, however, hopefully no one will be too inconvenienced by the summary form of presentation here.

In sum, however, with these caveats about a few sections, we think the theoretical discussions in this book are accessible, important, and also suited to activists who want to develop socialist strategy and program. It seems to us that new visions and new strategies for reaching them depend on existence of new ways of understanding our societies and our roles within them. If this is so, and if our movements are to be participatory, it will not do to leave "the problem of theory" to treatment by select groups of academics. We will all have to deal with theory, not solely to ensure that there are no monopolies on a powerful and important component of socialist process, but also to ensure that socialist theory is invested with the lessons of real experiences beyond what academics have access to. Theory must be demystified at the same time that it is brought into contact with contemporary experiences of all kinds. Hopefully our efforts in this book will be a useful contribution to this process.

By making an analogy between a more complete totalist socialist theory and vision on the one hand, and a major architecturally innovative structure on the other, it is possible to delineate many of our feelings about *Socialism In Theory and Practice*. The need for the new building arises from the weaknesses of existing alternatives, yet these are not self-evident and for many reasons elude clear enunciation. The contours of the new building involve many innovations. Its construction requires quality work by

people with very diverse skills and talents. As but two workers with considerable skill in some aspects of construction but much less in others, we are obviously incapable of erecting the entire edifice. What task should we embark upon?

If others are to exert the necessary energy and intelligence to create the new building as soon as possible they must feel, as we already do, that such a creation is both possible and desirable. The aim of our efforts must be to display enough of the foundation, enough of the main beams, and perhaps—in a few aspects of design and construction—enough of the detail to allow answers to two questions: First, with further work by capable architects and movement builders of diverse background, will the foundation and main structures be so improved to make the new building viable, strong, safe, and livable? And second, with the rest of the details elaborated, the contours filled out and the building completed including whatever alterations of the initial visions prove necessary, will the final creation be superior to existing alternatives and in tune with our most profound needs and desires?

At the same time as trying to provide enough argument to allow answers to these two questions, it is also necessary for us to avoid overextending. If we try to describe or construct too much of the foundation, too many of the main support beams, or too much of the detail, we will make so many errors as too necessarily distract attention from the worth of the initial conception.

This is the line we must uneasily straddle in these volumes. It means that there are parts where we felt greater confidence in our tools, training, and experience and thus went further toward detail. But there are also parts where we were hesitant even at many steps in the elaboration of rough contours. We can only hope that the partial structure we present will help inspire the collective and sustained effort necessary for elaborating a new socialist theory and vision for the eighties and beyond.

In Volume Two of this work our focus is primarily on four countries, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Cuba. We address the internal arrangements of the institutions of these societies and the different theories people bring to bear to understand these. And we make certain proposals concerning future possibilities as well. But we don't spend much time addressing the interrelations between the countries, nor their foreign policies and