

THE FUTURE OF SOCIALISM¹

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Introduction

The theoretical crisis facing Marxism, and the political crisis gripping the socialist movement internationally, is clearly grave. In marked contrast to the past few decades, where to be progressive was to be socialist and to be intellectual was to be left, we are entering a decade where socialism is in retreat and leftists are on the defensive. Indeed, some have concluded that to even speak of its future is to engage in absurdities and have embarked on a headlong flight into new intellectual fashions of self-centred relativism. For those who find this route ethically distasteful and analytically unsatisfactory two options remain: retreat into dogma or begin the difficult process of theoretically and politically reconceptualising the socialist project.

In the spirit of the latter task it seemed to me socially responsible to present this selected summary of a recent international conference on the future of socialism for the benefit of those comrades, especially inside South Africa, who were not present so that a wider audience of socialists can participate in this crucial debate. Clearly many of us have been forced to re-evaluate much of what we regarded as the conceptual touchstones of socialism. For those this document is meant to be a further stimulus to reformulate what we mean by democratic socialism. On the other hand, those who have remained oblivious of the need to reconstruct, in theory and practice, tired and dogmatic conceptions of socialism, hopefully it will force a conceptual and practical springcleaning.

The conference was co-sponsored by the *Monthly Review Foundation* and the *New York Marxist School*. It was held at Hunter College, New York (October 12-14, 1990), with about 450 people attending. There were no written papers presented at the conference and 4-5 speakers per session.

The structure of the conference consisted of plenaries on *Socialist realities, socialist alternatives; New social forces in Eastern Europe and the USSR; What kind of socialism is possible in a capitalist world; Socialism in the 1990's: where do we go from here?* In between these there were two parallel panel sessions. The first consisted of parallel sessions on *What was it that collapsed in Eastern Europe; Changes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union and their implications for Third World countries; Building mass movements*. The second consisted of parallel sessions on *Nationalism, populism, and xenophobia; Markets and socialism; Strategies for a democratic socialism; Social movements and the working class*.

Although I did manage to take extensive notes and record on tape many of the presentations, I am obviously giving my own impressions and interpretation of what was said. I did not hear all the presentations since two sessions were held in parallel, and I did not necessarily choose the most interesting and intellectually fruitful parallel sessions. Indeed from other accounts the presentation by Maria Helena Alves of the Brazilian Workers Party in the session on Building Mass Movements was a highlight which I missed. Likewise the session on Markets and Socialism, which I sneaked into close to the end of question time, made me wish I had chosen differently. Finally, in the session on Strategies for a Democratic Socialism, I missed the presentation by Lin Chun, which others regarded as exceptionally informative on China.

The composition of the conference was interesting. The audience was obviously heavily weighted towards socialists from the USA, but the speakers reflected a fair international mix: *North America* (16) - 14 from the USA and 2 from Canada; *Latin America* (6) - 2 from Cuba and 1 each from Argentina, Brazil, El Salvador and Nicaragua; *Western Europe* (3) - 1 each from France, West Germany, and Switzerland; *Eastern Europe* (12) - 4 from Poland, 3 from the GDR, 2 from Yugoslavia and 1 each from Bulgaria, Hungary and the USSR; *Asia* (2) - 1 each from China and the Philippines; *Middle East* (1) - 1 from Palestine; *Africa* (3) - all 3 from South Africa. The preponderance of Eastern European speakers reflected the dramatic changes taking place in that region, as did the paucity of speakers from Asia reflect the authoritarian socialist regimes still present there. There were glaring gaps from advanced capitalist countries in Western Europe with strong socialist traditions - eg Scandinavia, the United Kingdom and Italy.

The speakers were primarily academics or intellectuals from outside the universities. The audience contained a more representative mix of intellectuals and activists. The one striking thing about the social composition of the participants was the relative absence of students and younger socialists. The 'youth' in the American left, if one uses the conference as a yardstick, is alarmingly close to middle-aged!

Monthly Review is an independent Marxist journal that from its founding in the 1950's broke with Stalinism. Its focus has been on problems of imperialism and dependency as well as Third World liberation movements. The fact that it was organised by *Monthly Review* clearly had some influence on both the composition of the presenters and the areas the conference focussed on. I was, for example, aware of quite a number of prominent socialist academics in North America who were suprisingly not present.

In what follows I give general impressions, evaluate some of the problems and finally present selected summaries of the most useful presentations that I

heard. For reasons that are obvious to South Africans I have provided very much fuller presentations by Slovo and Mzala which in some cases are verbatim. For reasons of clarity, readability, consistency, as well as space limitations, I have however edited their presentations in order to fit into this broad summary.

The conference vacillated between three agendas:

- as a serious analytic event grappling with the theoretical problems of socialism and the political implications of its failures;
- as a political gathering to set out new strategy reflecting the lessons of the past few decades;
- as an existential catharsis for beleaguered North American socialists.

The conference was called at a time when the left internationally is in crisis. This crisis has a number of long term roots that have been pertinent throughout most of the second half of the last decade - the theoretical crisis of Marxism; the inability of socialists to make any headway in the industrialised countries; the dominance over the last decade of conservative neo-liberal governments in the USA, Britain and Germany; and the abandonment of socialist attempts in the Third World. In addition the surprisingly rapid collapse of what has been called 'actually existing socialism' in Eastern Europe and the accelerating changes taking place in the Soviet Union have exacerbated this crisis of the left. Although not advertised as such, the theoretical, political and ideological effects of the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' provided the immediate focal point and the terms of reference for the conference.

The collapse of Eastern Europe raised contradictory responses from most conference participants. These changes were welcomed since they heralded the collapse of authoritarian regimes that were regarded as fundamentally opposed, or at least as embarrassing, to real socialism. Most participants were at pains to point out that, in their view, these regimes were not equatable with socialism, and therefore, contrary to the orthodoxy prevalent in most bourgeois commentaries, did not signify the collapse of the socialist project. Hence many speakers were at pains to stress (but without sufficient theoretical weight being accorded to it in the organisation of the conference) the importance of democracy and anti-authoritarianism for the socialist project.

However, the collapse of Eastern Europe also proved to be a major source of angst for many participants. For, contrary to their hopes, the social system that seemed to be replacing authoritarian and statist 'existing socialism' was not a new 'democratic socialism' but rather 'radical free-marketism'. Implicit in the reproach that the Eastern Europeans were 'retreating to capitalism' was some sort of a defence of the past against the betrayal of this headlong rush to embrace Milton Friedman, Reaganomics and Thatcherism. There seemed, therefore, a marked ambivalence towards everything that the disappearing regimes of

Eastern Europe stood for.

The left seemed to have precious little in the way of socialist projects and socialist movements to act as an encouraging reference point. The social aspects of Eastern European socialism could not be heralded as social achievements. The advanced capitalist societies were not visibly breeding the immediate seeds of their destruction. Third World countries that had claimed to be attempting a transition to socialism had been discredited with their own citizens. In short there were very few optimistic scenarios for socialists in the USA as they surveyed developments in the Third World. This lacuna perhaps explained the somewhat surprising adulation accorded to Slovo's presentations. Certainly this very same audience of predominately North American socialists, only a few years ago, would have instead viewed him suspiciously as representing reactionary Stalinism.

A discussion of the future of socialism in current international conditions has at least to come to terms with a number of theoretical and political problems:

- What do we mean (economically and politically) by socialism now that command economies and political statism are discredited?
- What has happened to capitalism in this post-fordist era and what are the possibilities for a transition in the advanced capitalist countries towards another economic and political system that we could call socialist?
- Given the failure of orthodox Leninism how does one, as a socialist, assess social democracy, especially in the advanced capitalist world?
- Why has the democratisation of Eastern Europe resulted in a headlong rush into the free-market capitalism, rather than the maintenance of social welfare gains while democratising the state?
- Given the fact that the advanced capitalist countries, particularly in Western Europe (eg Italy), now contain the largest groupings of (broadly defined) socialists, what are the implications of the political focus of socialism internationally shifting to these countries?
- Given the collapse of socialist projects in the Third World, what does the future hold for these countries in a world dominated politically by the United States and economically by Japan and Germany?

Of course dealing adequately with all these issues would have been extremely difficult and one cannot blame a conference for not doing so. Clearly some were stressed more than others. As will be seen from the selections summarised below the conference was very Third World oriented and focused heavily on the failures of 'really existing socialism'. Notwithstanding some isolated attempts to the contrary many of these central problems were inadequately dealt with. Insufficient attention was paid to the theoretical problem of the meaning of socialism, the implications of the current reorganisation of advanced capitalism

was all but ignored, European social democracy did not figure on the agenda, and other socialist tendencies in the advanced capitalist centres were mainly discussed in relation to the USA.

Rather than chronologically listing the summary addresses in the order in which they were presented in the conference I have grouped the selections below in terms of four themes: discussion on the theoretical problems of socialism; tendencies in advanced capitalism; failures of 'really existing socialism'; and, finally, the possibilities for socialism in the Third World, particularly South Africa.

Theoretical problems

Paul Sweezy (co-editor of *Monthly Review*) in his opening address attempted to place the theoretical issues high on the agenda by posing the question: has socialism, and consequently also Marxism, failed? His answer was twofold: no, Marxism is still valid. It is still the best explanation available but doesn't explain how socialism came to this impasse. The problem with socialist attempts were that they took place in less developed countries in the context of a hostile international situation.

Barbara Ehrenreich (journalist and co-chair of Democratic Socialists of America) took up the challenge in a rousing libertarian address which posed the issues at a popular, rather than analytic level. The collapse of existing socialism and the crisis of Marxism was in her opinion an excellent thing since it destroyed the false but comfortable guarantees and certainties that the left had always depended on. The issue that the left had to face was: is it possible to be a leftist without certainties and an overarching theory? Her answer: yes, and it is about time! We need a post Marxist left and also Marxist ways of analysis which has to understand its limits. The problem for Marxism is not that it could not explain things but that it could not explain enough things - eg gender, patriarchy, racism, environmental issues, etc. For example, Marxism illuminates capitalist exploitation of women but cannot explain where that status comes from. Likewise it cannot explain racism since the roots of racism go deeper than capitalism. The same applies to war and ecological destruction which pre-date capitalism.

So we have to go forward to a new diverse leftism without the guarantees of a grand theory. What should make a leftist in the 1990s is a moral perspective on human dignity and freedom, a commitment to end economic exploitation and a determination to stand by all the discriminated in society. A leftist, in her terms, is thus someone who opposes domination in all forms, stands by libertarianism and egalitarianism. Since one has to understand the world in order to change it leftists have to escape Marxism as scripture and give support to irreverence and unorthodoxy in analysis.

Jacek Kochanowicz (Polish economic historian) isolated two traditions of socialism: social democracy which ensured that the market was not the sole regulator of the economy and hence softened the effects of the market; and command economies which through a radical opposition to the market and private property aimed to restructure the social structure of society by means of a rational plan.

The latter was utopian and ideal and arose from underdeveloped areas of the world, particularly Russia. It was introduced in Eastern Europe from above without mass consent. Apart from the ideals of justice this model also attempted to transform the agrarian base of society and build an industrial base. In so doing it created economic and political aspirations that could not be fulfilled. Because it was done from above, as well as the fact that it failed, this model of socialism has been rejected. As a reaction to bureaucratic commandism the populations of Eastern Europe are looking towards market economies and engaging in market fetishism. This explains why people are closing their eyes to the negative effects of Western capitalism and the lessons of other less developed countries. Yet, whilst they have shrugged off the concept of socialism, they also take for granted social institutions and social security services provided by the command economy. In short, they want their cake and eat it. Now more than ever they need the welfare state, but they cannot separate these institutions from the totalising communist state so it is difficult to keep these when other institutions are decomposing.

The theoretical lessons of the Eastern European experience were:

- It is impossible to build a socialist society in a planned way using a utopian ideal.
- It is impossible to get rid of the market and aspects of private property if one wants to respond to the needs of society. The market is necessary to coordinate the economy in some way and this implies some form of private property.
- It is understood that this implies capitalism but they cannot see how to get true socialism *and* have economic development. Western socialists should not dismiss the experience of Eastern Europe as simply the wrong people being in power at the wrong time.
- Despite Eastern Europe one should not discard the socialist ideal. Modern societies are highly industrialised, urbanised and mass societies. One cannot leave it to market forces alone to provide infrastructure, health care, social services and marginalised sectors of society. These must be addressed by the public sector in a democratic framework.
- Non-market regulations are necessary because of a moral imperative regarding social justice and in order to ensure social stability. The socialist ideal in this sense is not an alternative to the modern world but

an integral part of it.

Harry Magdoff (co-editor of *Monthly Review*) started with the assertion that the plan versus the market is not the basic issue. Rather it is what kind of socialism one wants and for what purpose. This always brings one back to issues of socialist morality, class interests and the kind of democracy one wishes. In this regard he raised five crucial issues:

1) Can socialism be built without a major change in consciousness and standards of morality? Struggles in this realm are at the heart of the socialist project.

2) We have to accept that classes and interest groups persist even after the dominant classes are overthrown. Urbanisation and economic growth raise significant differences amongst people which are the basis of divisions. The more one concentrates on modernisation and economic growth the more one facilitates differences.

3) Democracy needs equality and vice versa. Different class interests obstruct meaningful democracy because of the conflictual nature of interests. In our societies traditional forms of democracy often act as a facilitator of differentiation and unequal allocation of social resources. Therefore we need to address the empowerment of the disempowered.

4) What sort of economic development do we need? We have to prioritise between different allocations of resources. If we prioritise redistribution to the masses then we can do a lot even with little growth. Growth should not be neglected but we should not make it the overriding consideration. We need to accept limits to growth. The drive for incessant growth increases a rigid division of labour, unequal distribution and differentiation between privileged and deprived.

5) A market is needed to distribute goods and services but what kind of market is the issue? If the economy is to serve the people then central planning is a necessity. This does not mean dictatorial planning. Resources are limited and a choice has to be made about their allocation. This can either take place by the market according to profit imperatives or by the state as in wartime economies where the government used national planning to set priorities.

A society wishing to turn to socialism in the midst of capitalism must become as independent as feasible from the international network of capitalist trade and finance. The more it engages in that network the more it must conform to the requirements of the financial world and capitalist business cycle. The constraints of the world market then become the dominant influence in the socialist economy. He contested the Eastern European example which argued that socialist countries needed the technology of the capitalist world. If one attempts to compete with Western consumer society then it is true but if one wishes to achieve basic redistribution of social goods and pay attention to the poor then

one does not need the most advanced western technology. The crucial question for socialists is: what kind of socialism do we want and and for what purpose?

Mihailo Markovic (Yugoslav academic and vice-president of the Socialist Party of Serbia) focused on clarifying what is meant by democratic socialism in order to know what strategies to adopt. Socialism is characterised by the following three features:

- Social property in some basic means of production (ie in basic key industries). This is not equivalent to state property.
- A considerable level of macro regulation over the market economy by the socially responsible democratically elected social agencies.
- A high level of social welfare.

Over and above the normal operations of democracy in bourgeois society, democracy in socialism must have the following features:

- Be extended from the sphere of politics to that of economy and culture.
- In addition to representative democracy there must also be an element of direct democracy in the workplace and social institutions, as well as a mechanism of recall in politics.
- A greater role must be played by mass movements.
- Free direct and secret elections with a plurality of candidates proposed not only by political parties but also by movements and groups of citizens.

Democratic socialism is therefore different from both bureaucratic authoritarian socialism which labelled itself 'real existing socialism' and from social democracy. Compared to authoritarian socialism, democratic socialism differs in the following ways: political pluralism, free direct elections, a substantial role for civil society, rule of law, equality of all forms of property before the law to protect small business and cooperatives. The highest political organ has to lay down the rules for the use of social property, how it could be sold, how revenues could be distributed between working collectives and society at large. There must be competent specialists, operating in accordance with those laws and controlled by the government and the courts, enabled to take the decisions as to how to use social property.

It is also different from social democracy, not so much in terms of social welfare, but with respect to the nature of property. Bernstein saw the answer in increasing the number of existing property stock holders so that property would not need to be abolished but just turn into the property of an increasing number of people. All should become capitalists and hence solve the problem. However, owing to the emergence of powerful middle classes, progressive taxing and the welfare state, class conflict in existing social democratic countries has been reduced but class differences are larger than a truly socialist system can tolerate.

Concentration of property in the hands of a small number of wealthy families gives a corresponding level of political power in the market place of politics where money plays a decisive role in elections. There are also differences in the conception of political pluralism and democracy. Social democracy only accepts representative democracy and disregards the possibilities for participatory democracy.

Under real existing socialism the state apparatchiks and bureaucrats for purely ideological reasons presented a simplified view of Western capitalism in order to orchestrate its rejection. Now these same people in Eastern Europe and the USSR, once again for purely ideological reasons, are presenting an extremely vulgarised and simple picture of Western capitalism. They have jumped from one extreme to another and become advocates of laissez faire market economy. In so doing they have become the darling of Western conservative monetarists.

Joe Slovo (general secretary of the South African Communist Party) addressed the question of what created the gap between socialist reality and socialist aspiration? Was the promise false from the start or was the promise merely unfulfilled? The promise was not false. It was merely unfulfilled. Even within the deformed societies which passed for socialism there were some achievements that signalled the potential for socialism. It is clear that scores of millions were inspired in an attempt to build socialism from the ground and fought tenaciously to defend what they considered to be the realism of its promise. They could not have done so, they could have not engaged in this battle on the ground, if all that they experienced was a total and unmitigated failure. But on balance it undoubtedly was a failure. It is clear that the former countries of existing socialism are on the point of collapse. Why is a question that will be debated for decades to come.

If the external hostility theory is dismissed as the sole explanation, and as the main culprit, then one of two answers is left. If what happened had to happen because of an irreparable fault in the whole body of Marxist thought (as a tool of analysis and not as a do-it-yourself kit with ready made answers to problems of racism, sexism, etc) then that is it. For the moment it may be the end of history.

If however the essence of Marxism, with its aspirations towards a socialist order, remains valid, then to enable a return to history, one needs to uncover what it is that went wrong. No quick fix is possible. Almost as soon as one has tried to enunciate finite explanations, nagging doubts creep in - both about what has been said and about the silences.

He pleaded guilty to a number of quite loud silences and briefly touched on some of them. It is obviously not enough to describe the distortions and their

effects. The central question is: what made those distortions possible? Clearly the legitimisation of Stalinism in actually existing socialism has a significant portion of its roots in the emergence of a new class of bureaucrats with an economic interest to maintain their dominant and privileged position.

But this class reductionism does have its limits. It would be equally misleading to ignore the subjective factor and the sometime overt leading role of individuals during relatively short spurts of human history. If this is not so, how does one explain the tens of millions of communists outside of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe who have no access to power or privilege, and who were, and some of them continue to be, even holier than the pope? The integrity of socialist political organisation demands mechanisms which will effectively institutionalise inner organisational democracy, inner party democracy and prevent a take-over by a tyrant or a group of tyrants.

Another silence relates to the place of Leninism in the body of Marxism-Leninism. It is clear that a sizable portion of the diet of so-called Leninism is really re-packaged Stalinism in search of legitimisation. The technique was to transform moments of specific revolutionary practice into universal and timeless maxims of Marxism which served to rationalise undemocratic methods both within the party and in society. The paraphernalia of undemocratic practices - which may be unavoidable during periods of illegality, or in a counterrevolutionary assault in the moment after the transformation - became legitimised by the codification by what a so-called Leninist party is.

Those who have been in the communist movement for a long time will know how for decades 'What is to be done?', Lenin's great work written in 1902, became the bible. It is now abundantly clear how completely inappropriate and inapplicable that concept of a party set out in 'What is to be done?' is in conditions of legality and even more so when power is achieved. Is there, on reflection, a message more unreal than the elevation of this brilliant 1902 prescription for Tsarist Russia into the kind of catechism it became for most communists?

Connected with all this is the concept of vanguard. A concept which was originally born at moments of revolutionary upheaval and counter revolutionary chaos but was given a permanent place as Leninism in socialist civil society. This applies too to the concept of the single party state. With absolutely no pedigree or even mention in the classics of Marxism, but reflecting perhaps the very special moment in a very special country's history, this too was turned into a Leninist prescription. All this amounted to the conclusion that henceforth it was not very relevant whether or not the party had the support of society or even has the support of the class it claims to represent. It is given a monopoly of leadership by law and not by mobilisation or support. Indeed it no longer has to

relate to its constituency at all, and all this in the name of Leninism. It becomes a short run from the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat to the notion, which is its substantial application in practice, of dictatorship over the proletariat.

There is a need in any case to question whether the whole concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat ever had validity in the context of true socialist aspirations. Can the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie - in itself a much oversimplified concept in some of the Marxist works - be equated with what is claimed to be its legitimate Leninist obverse for socialist society, the dictatorship of the proletariat?

Leaving aside moments of revolutionary chaos the socialist project can in no way legitimately be described as a dictatorship of any class. In general the fundamental failure that has to be addressed is the divide between socialism and democracy both within the party, and within society leading to a gross form of what one could call socialist alienation of the producer from all levels of the socio-economic formation.

The perhaps irresolvable dilemma facing Gorbachev in attempting to bridge the gap from 1985 onwards between socialist aspirations and socialist realities is that without democratising the party there was no way open to democratise society because of the dominant role of the party at every level of society; and there was no way of democratising the party without a democratic groundswell from society.

South Africa is given as an example of one of the few countries in the world where the communist party and socialist ideas are not vilified, and it is certainly true that the SACP has singular support in South Africa. Recently a survey carried out by a very conservative national newspaper shows that the SACP took third place in the popularity poll among blacks. First the ANC, second the United Democratic Front, and third the party. What is even more significant is that another poll that was carried out recently amongst blacks showed that 70 percent of them opted for a socialist future. Part of the popularity of the party and of socialism is related to the fact that the SACP, in some respects before the transformations which Gorbachev attempted to bring about in the structures of the party and society in the Soviet Union, had moved away from some of the worst distortions in relation to bankrupt concepts, and in relation to mass organisations etc. Partly that has earned for the party the support of quite a number of groupings on the left which had previously stood aside and competed for the allegiance of the working people.

But basically the reason for the popularity of the socialist project in South Africa is that it is of course not socialism that has failed there but capitalism that has failed and most miserably. The SACP must try, as a party, not to fail

socialism.

Tendencies of advanced capitalism

Sweezy, in introducing the speakers for the closing session, drew the audience's attention to the need to focus on the future of capitalism when looking at the future of socialism. There was a tendency to underestimate the difficulties in which capitalism now finds itself. It has won the cold war and the so-called socialist countries of Eastern Europe and the USSR have been defeated. But they were not socialist, even though they initially started out in that direction. Capitalism is, however, in bad shape. This is obvious in the Third World. The most powerful country is the USA which is in the beginning stages of a recession which gives every indication of getting worse for the foreseeable future. Many believe, including himself, that it could easily slide into a deep depression which will last for a very long time. Anyone who thinks they can understand what is happening to capitalism through the writings of the bourgeois economists and social scientists is simply deluding themselves. The only way to understand what is going on is through that brand of Marxist analysis which has a long history in dealing with the problems of monopoly capitalism and imperialism. This analysis has been based on the idea of the maturing of capitalism leading to increasing stagnation and blockages in the accumulation process. These have led to monopoly, financial explosions and the globalisation of the economy. If one does not understand what is going on in the world capitalist system then one is bound to get into all kinds of political confusion.

Manning Marable (US sociology professor), argued that the collapse of socialism had resulted in the hegemony of a new conservative political orthodoxy - capitalism was triumphant, proven correct by history and, as a result it was held that Marxism/socialism was dead. This had led many socialists to retreat to pre-Marxian forms (humanism, early Marx, Hegel, etc) and a repudiation that the class struggle determines social relations. The loss of the counter-weight of the USSR against the West has radical implications for the Third World. It makes it easy for the multinationals to exploit and dominate, and makes the non-aligned movement nonsensical. The retreat of the social movements in Eastern Europe into reactionary movements which stifled their incipient radical nature would soon lead to dissatisfaction with these regimes.

In the light of the crushing of working class movements the question that has to be posed is: is Marxism still relevant as a mode of social analysis? His answer: the class struggle is still relevant as demonstrated by the massive exploitation and class division and inequities at the very heart of American society. We were witnessing the opening up of a new chapter as the USA moved into a crisis of the rich against the mass of society.

How could one show the relevance of Marxist analysis to this social dynamic in the advanced capitalist societies?:

- stop the overemphasis on electoral politics over other social struggles;
- move out of the workplace into the urban community where most manifestations of domination, exploitation and discrimination occurs;
- produce a creative response to environmental issues taking into account production and social needs;
- rethink electoral politics, particularly the role of the Democratic Party, using a class analysis of the electoral system.

The American left have to build a new unity. This means rethinking organisational forms and strategies, returning to the principles that unite socialists in a non-sectarian way. This requires a synthesis combining the strengths of social democratic organisation, a commitment to democracy, goodwill and tolerance, and learning from the commitment of communist cadres.

Real existing socialism

Peter Bihari (Hungarian economist) focused on Hungary. The revolutions in Eastern Europe are bringing these countries from dictatorship to a democratic system. This process involves a transformation of the political system and the class structure. Politically Hungary is moving towards feudal capitalism. The cold war has been internalised with social groups from the old communist order now being stigmatised. The old apparatchiks are being replaced with new bureaucrats who have either correct political affiliations or personal ties to politicians. The new managerial elite is based on the acceptance of Christian national capitalism. The previous ideology of Marxism-Leninism is dead and a new nationalist, anti-communist ideology is being constructed based on the elements of national identity, Christian belief, personal freedom and democracy. This ideology is heavily anti-communist, anti-socialist and anti-collectivist.

In terms of class structure and socio-economic transformation he isolated the following issues: the old ruling elite has been politically liquidated but no new ruling elite has yet come to the surface (ie a capitalist state without a capitalist class). The process won't follow the lines of classic primitive accumulation since the capital (physical assets) is already there. The key issue is who will seize this capital? A bitter struggle lies ahead because there are no social groups with a pre-determined role in grasping this social opportunity. The existing managers have the easiest opportunity to become the new capitalist class but the new political rulers are opposed to this because it is seen as an extension of the old system. Hence the renegotiation of enterprise managers on a central level. The workers will get fewer chances to emerge with any benefits from this new social structure. The overwhelming majority will bear the burden of the

transition.

Leo Panitch (Canadian political scientist) opened with some comments on the effects of Eastern Europe and the USSR on the left in the West. Most of us in the new left became socialists against the USSR and its brand of socialism. Hence there is cause to celebrate the new political freedom in Eastern Europe whilst being extremely concerned about the impossibility of a transition to democratic socialism there. Eastern Europe has produced an irony for the Western left - previously it has been hamstrung by authoritarian socialism in the East, now it is hamstrung by the collapse of authoritarian socialism in the East. He then proceeded to share insights from his recent trip to the USSR. Glasnost is immensely important and has produced an extraordinary ferment in the society. This political openness blends with the commercialisation of Moscow - more beggars and traders in public places. In the street culture Gorbachev is little revered because of his failure to improve the economy. What social forces are filling the vacuum? At present corruption (and the new Mafia that goes with it) dominates social and economic life. The whole economic and social system operates on the basis of corruption.

Most intellectuals are naive free-marketeers. However, on the left there are a number of groupings. Kagarlitsky and his group trying to form a new socialist party are small (reminiscent of the little sects in the West) and basically a throwback to the old Bolsheviks and Trotsky. Their main slogan is 'power to the soviets'. The new Mensheviks close to Gorbachev remain Marxists but claim that, since the attempt to create an alternative path to capitalism failed, the USSR has to get back on the tracks of historical accumulation. Hence there is no choice but to go backwards in a regulated way to capitalism in order to lay the material foundations for a new transition to true socialism. Some isolate two paths (South Korea or Brazil) that are possible for the USSR and prefer the South Korean option since it has less unemployment. In the unions there are a small cadre of serious younger (35-40) socialist Komsomol leaders in the local union circles who are strongly committed to democracy on the shop floor, in the unions, in the party and in the USSR political system. However, these leaders are very caught in decentralised city level politics and have no national network.

Daniel Singer (French journalist and author) focused on two issues: the restoration of capitalism, and the crystallisation of class conflict. The restoration of capitalism does not mean that these countries were socialist. Therefore one cannot argue that socialism is dead and buried. The end of capitalism in these countries did not mean the end of the reign of capital. Without being socialist these countries eliminated certain features of classic capitalism, particularly private ownership, therefore there is now an unprecedented privatisation taking place.

In any transition to a socialist society the issue is who is directing and in what direction? Is the society being determined by forces socially consciously mastering their own fate or by the market? In the USSR there is the latter tendency. No-one knows what socialism is about because of the legacy of Stalinism's vision of socialism. Therefore the only alternative seems to be a capitalist state with minimum wages and social security. But the opening up of international trade must mean the victory of capitalism in the USSR.

Under glasnost all classes are staking their claim. The most prominent is the privileged intelligentsia. We have the spokesmen for capitalism but not the class. Hence there is a struggle within the privileged to form this class. Gorbachev is more worried about popular revolt and the resurgence of old conservative forces in the party and the state. Workers are opposed to the party and the state which they identify as the bosses. They are also opposed to the new cooperatives since these are incipiently the new capitalists class. Workers don't have a clear vision of what they want. Generally the dominant ideology is a rejection of past Stalinism with an idealisation of Western capitalism. Unfortunately the choice for the USSR is not Sweden or the USA, but Bolivia or Mexico.

Pedro Monreal (Cuban academic) focused exclusively on Cuba. International factors, particularly the changes in the USSR and the disappearance of the socialist bloc, provided the catalyst for internal change in Cuba. It is now isolated in its fight against US imperialism and has to retreat to self reliance. This requires profound transformations in society, economy and the political structure if it was going to survive. Cuba was not prepared to follow the Eastern European path to political democracy. They needed a new model of socialism applicable to Cuba. The coming party congress will pay particular attention to this issue. There is a consensus on the need for democratisation to solve problems. Their problem is that they have to do so in the face of increasing pressure from US and decreasing solidarity from traditional allies. Previous reforms in Cuba had always been social and economic. Now in response to pressure from party members democratisation had come to be a central element in reform.

For the first time there was a debate taking place at all levels of the communist party. There was a consensus in the controlling organs of the party about the parameters within which this debate was allowed to take place. There was a need to maintain social property even though debating its form. The state had to play the major role even though the party accepted that there have to be changes. They cannot afford the luxury of fractions in the party given the desire of the US to eliminate socialism.

Although they want both socialism and democracy, they are not prepared to sacrifice socialism for democratisation. Neither the socialist nature of the system

nor the single party system is being debated. Extra pressure had been added to the debate when Cuba felt the impact of the withdrawal of Soviet aid in September 1990. There are dramatic changes taking place relative to a year ago, even if these seem not so great compared to other countries. During 1985-89 there had been clashes within the party leadership as the latter never really believed in perestroika nor in glasnost. The younger generation of party members want control over the way society works. They want neither the central organs of the party nor the market to have control over society. However, if the existing institutions are changed without replacing them with new powerful ones then there will be trouble. The aim is to put more power into the hands of the popular congresses and particularly in regard to the allocation of resources.

Currently they are looking at the following changes:

- a drastic reduction in the number of people employed in the party apparatus;
- rationalisation of departments;
- reduction of number of elected officials in the party;
- reduction in the role of the government;
- new rules for proposing and electing candidates on more democratic lines.

Socialism in the Third World

South Africa

Slovo reflected on the comintern's argument that it was impossible to effect a transition towards socialism in the underdeveloped world without the technological base provided by advanced capitalism. This could only be done if the socialist world came to its aid. But the socialist world not only did not expand but was also technologically incapable of devoting sufficient resources to aid those countries that at the political level were ready to move to some kind of socialist transition. In addition these underdeveloped countries lacked the material foundation and the social force of a developed working class to build socialism.

Therefore, in retrospect the lesson is that it was premature and wrong for most African countries to proclaim a socialist perspective. It was premature because it was meaningless for the bulk of the people. There was no historic group and no culture to receive this socialist project. The working class was actually a backward, illiterate peasantry in most of these countries. Transforming the broad liberation movements of Mozambique, Congo, Angola, Ethiopia into Marxist-Leninist vanguard movements, which included a Stalinist connotation, damaged the future prospects of building socialism in these countries as well as undermining the popular base of most of these movements.

The Western and certainly the South African media claims that socialism has failed in Africa. But, even more so than in Eastern Europe, it is not socialism that failed in Africa. It was a premature leap into an unreal objective that failed. The media tend to forget that 90 percent of Africa lives in distorted capitalist states where misery pervades all of social life and which are adjuncts of the north. If they want an example of a failed system that cannot even provide for the most basic needs of a dignified existence it is capitalism in Africa.

What then is the role of a socialist organisation in a situation in which the socialist project is not realistically immediately attainable and in which an emphasis on it actually discredits the possibility of eventually building socialism? In South Africa the SACP has not placed a socialist project as an immediate objective. Rather it stresses that the main content of the struggle is national liberation which is the interests of all classes and strata who are subject to the system of national domination. In place of the question whether it is class struggle or national struggle, the SACP asks what is the class content of our national struggle and what is the national content of our class struggle? The SACP's task is to protect the independence and role of the working class in the broad alliance for national liberation.

There is no formula for socialist transformation. The day after transformation the economy of a country is exactly the same as the day before. After the euphoria has died down the people are exactly the same in their psychological make-up as the day before. Therefore, creating socialism requires not an edict to transform the economy and the people but requires the creation of the socialist person. It is not possible to polevault into socialism. Where this has been attempted in Africa, Europe and Asia (Cambodia) it has discredited the whole socialist project.

South Africa is moving to a radically transformed post-apartheid society with a mixed economy. The SACP regards it as its task in the post apartheid society to ensure that the mixed economy is one with a socialist orientation. Given that there is an enormous difference between state control and people's control, between state and public property, one should not be mesmerised by the concept of nationalisation. The post-apartheid state - if it is really a democratic state - will move towards redressing the imbalances between the racial groups. This explains why the task is easier than elsewhere, and why the SACP and socialism has popularity in South Africa. One does not have to be a Marxist or a socialist to support this. All one has to be is an honest black patriot to believe that there cannot be liberation in South Africa without a fundamental redistribution of wealth. If tomorrow all apartheid laws were repealed and nothing was done about the economic disparities between the races then it would not be liberation.

This enables South Africa to move towards a redistribution of wealth which

will create, in a relatively short time, conditions making the socialist project a realistic and attainable objective. The regime has accepted that it cannot stand in the way of removing racial discrimination and granting political rights for all. The battles are coming over the economic factor - for example the distribution of land.

The SACP's objective is to move to a socialist society in a peaceful parliamentary way on the basis of political pluralism. The SACP must be subject to democratic control and has no right to monopoly over socialist or non-socialist organisations. The SACP's political role must be endorsed and re-endorsed by the people. It has emerged from a period of Stalinist distortion and the limitations of conspiratorial practices hemming in the possibility of practising democracy. It is now moving into a period when it will have nothing more to be ashamed of in representing the noble socialist ideal.

Mzala (SACP and ANC representative) pointed out that one of the characteristics of both the ANC and the SACP in the period before the developments in Eastern Europe, was that they were uncritical recipients of many Soviet foreign policy positions, including an appreciation and evaluation of socialism and what was being experienced in Eastern Europe. This does not mean that there was not an internally-generated theoretical and ideological response to the problems of building socialism in Eastern Europe, but within the movement there was not a forum for a critical debate about these issues.

There were exceptions. The SACP considers itself to have pioneered some aspects of glasnost in South Africa in relation to how the party formulated and conceptualised the relationship between itself and the mass organisations. Some of the things that are being raised now, and hopefully will not be canonised again as doctrines, the SACP attempted to do in South Africa long before there was any talk of glasnost.

In the early 1970s Slovo wrote a piece that was ultimately published by *Marxism Today*. It had initially been intended for the *African Communist* which would not accept it because it was a devastating critique of some positions that had been published in Moscow by Progress Publishers on the concept of the non-capitalist road to development. That article symbolises perhaps the earliest effort in the SACP, and in the liberation movement, to try to introduce some critical perspectives.

The conceptual framework that underlay the liberation movement's positions was that the national liberation struggle is by definition an anti-imperialist struggle. There exists a world revolutionary process, and within this there is a group of countries, however deformed their experimentation, who nevertheless were taking up positions against imperialist countries, and who were willing to give moral as well as material support. That affected the degree to which one

could critically evaluate those countries, minimise whatever they were attempting to do, or perhaps even dismiss them as irrelevant. To the extent that taking up a position in opposition to the Soviet Union was always regarded almost as equal to being anti-revolutionary or counter-revolutionary. Anti-Sovietism was seen to be counter-revolutionary.

The fraternal relationship the SACP and ANC had with the various communist parties influenced the manner in which they related to these parties' internal problems. It was always dictated by the principle that it is not their business to be pre-occupied by a critique of what was happening in those countries, particularly since they were receiving assistance during those critical periods when nobody else would actually give that degree of assistance.

They also very much believed what they were told, as well as all the statistics that were given to them about the workings of the Soviet or Czechoslovakian or GDR economy. They all believed that it was working very well because this was the information that was given, and they had no reason to doubt it. When Gorbachev came out and said 'Look our economy is actually at the point of collapse' they were just as surprised as anybody else. This explains - given some of those realities - the development of certain uncertainties, and the groping for a new self definition.

If one did a survey of how the *African Communist*, the theoretical journal of the SACP, related to the whole question of socialism, whether in relation to what was going on the socialist countries or how the SACP perceived it, one could make a point that will be very difficult to dispute. It was a record of unmitigated intolerance of those Marxist positions that were questioning the legitimacy of the Soviet practice. One of the biggest challenges will be to break with that kind of attitude and to create a forum for a lively critical debate which alone holds the possibilities of advancing theoretical perspectives and ensuring that nothing is canonised into a doctrine. It is in the nature of Marxist theory itself that those who uphold it should consistently be looking for change, be restless and ever probing new ground.

The ground for that has already been sown in South Africa. A couple of years ago if Slovo had published his pamphlet 'Has Socialism Failed?' he would be called a heretic within the party. But it is possible today. Perhaps more than everything he is saying in that pamphlet, the very idea of being critical and introducing this critical perspective is the one dynamic feature of the SACP in the present period. That is the biggest contribution that is being made by the developments that are taking place in Eastern Europe.

In southern Africa, and perhaps south of the equator, the SACP, more than the ANC which has never really addressed the socialist project, has kept alive the perspective of socialism. One of the restricting factors has been the whole nature

of the relationship between the ANC and the party - the degree to which the party, despite it being an independent organisation, but nevertheless having most of its personnel embroiled in ANC or other national liberation tasks, did not give sufficient theoretical and practical contribution to the development of this socialist perspective. It nevertheless did have some influence as can be witnessed in the degree to which some of the leading working class leaders were recently announced to be members of the SACP. Whatever the problems, there was a group within the liberation forces that fought to try to build the forces of socialism in South Africa.

One of the influences shaping the socialist perspective in South Africa has been the failed experience in Mozambique and Angola. The destabilising effect of South Africa made it quite difficult to begin to go beyond destabilisation and identify certain inherent problems in Mozambique's policies. The effect of both Mozambique and Angola can best be illustrated by the SACP's own analysis during the late 1970s which said that a new kind of freedom had dawned in southern Africa, indeed in Africa, which can be defined as people's power, as a transition to socialism.

The changes in Eastern Europe have had a sobering effect. It forced a realisation of the extent of reliance on external forces including the Americans and the socialist countries in Eastern Europe. It obliged a critical review of their former passive position in relation to the Soviet Union. Slovo's pamphlet was only a tip of an iceberg in a debate that has been going on in the movement, including very critical debates with some Soviet academics and scientists.

This process has coincided with the liberalisation of the organisations, including the SACP. In a very real sense even the style of leadership in the South African liberation movement reflected very much the Brezhnev style of doing things. They tended to consolidate a particular tradition, and anybody who was regarded as critical, or who was not clearly within the fold, even within the liberation movement, was either excluded or kept somewhere on ice or on the periphery. The new situation will see the democratisation of the organisations themselves - ANC and SACP - as well as a rejuvenation and a renewal of these organisations.

There will be resistance to it but those who accept the new methods of thinking and doing things, will ultimately triumph. They have a lot of support, particularly from a tradition that exists within the country which has been a democratic tradition. As a force essentially existing in exile, working in underground conditions, there was some justification for doing certain things. Although there was also an attempt by some to misuse this underground status in order to consolidate and prevent democratisation and to prevent this renewal and dynamism that should necessarily characterise the organisation.

One of the criticisms that is being made at the present moment is that the SACP either follows or agrees with every new General Secretary of the Soviet communist party. But that is not true. Long before Gorbachev, the SACP said something that he had not yet said. Over this period of struggle for liberation in South Africa, whatever problems they have had, the SACP has succeeded in developing a perspective of socialism that has gone beyond the educated and has gone to the working class people.

Recent surveys show that an overwhelming majority of South African people, particularly the working people, are actually for socialism. But whether or not this is a sentiment that is against apartheid or is a result of a theoretical rigour and understanding of what socialism is as a science, is the question. This is precisely the task - to translate this populism about socialism into something that can be organised, something that will be reliable, something that will not only build socialism when the time comes, but will make sure that no counter-revolution will reverse the process.

Moses Mayekiso (general secretary National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa) argued that socialism was secure in South Africa because of the way that capitalism had operated there. Socialists needed to unite in the SACP where rigorous and robust debate should take place. Socialists had to be confident and build a powerful civil society controlled by its own members and independent of any political party. The practices of the trade union movement around mandates, and shop floor control were important lessons for the building of grassroots democracy.

Rest of Third World

Carmen Diana Deere (US economist) posed four questions. Can one have socialism in the Third World without a significant transfer of resources to the Third World? What are the implications of the end of the Cold War for socialism in the Third World? Does the demise of state socialism have new possibilities for the left? If planning and state ownership are no longer central in socialist theory, what will ensure a socialist transition?

Carlos M Vilas (Argentinian academic) focused on the effect that the collapse of Eastern Europe/USSR and the restructuring of the international order will have on Latin America. The USSR and Eastern European traditionally had been supportive economically and militarily of anti-imperialist forces in Latin America. However, such aid did not stop many Latin America regimes from failing. The critical issue was, and still is, how to convert support into effective social transformation. The competition between the USSR and the USA had allowed room for the Third World to manoeuvre and gain access to resources. Despite Soviet disregard often of revolutionary movements (eg Sandinistas) this

allowed the latter to take advantage of the situation to their own benefit. Now that the world situation has altered there is a serious problem for radical movements and governments in Latin America. Where will they find a substitute? They will have to shift to greater self reliance in a world that is not conducive to self reliance. The disappearance of the USSR is leading to a rebuilding of the old colonial order of North (including the USSR) versus South. The USA is setting itself up as the world's policeman and operating as a fox in the chicken run.

There is a crisis of the left in Latin America. It is difficult to even build democracy when social resources are so low. Anti-imperialism is the main structural bone of Latin American politics. In the new world situation this will remain. The major issue facing the left is to develop a position which goes beyond anti-imperialism and roots itself in social and economic struggles of ordinary people for social transformation.

Arthur MacEwan (US economist) referred to a draft economic policy document (May 1990) for post-apartheid South Africa, which revealed all the problems of trying to restructure an economy to the benefit of the mass of the population. It commendably focused on redistribution but what was not clear was how the new government would finance this redistribution policy. The problems of potential capital flight, of internal and external intervention, etc, are apparent. The questions that face those struggling to achieve such goals are universal: under circumstances where capitalism is so globally dominant, what kind of socialism is possible? What kind of reforms are feasible? This is not simply a problem for poor countries of the Third World. It is just as true in Eastern Europe, and the highly industrialised countries (eg such as face the newly elected social democratic government in Ontario).

The problem is, in the context of the capitalist world they operate in, how to move without bringing down terrible reactions which will ruin the economy and undermine the sorts of reforms they want to bring about? The constraints operate on all sorts of levels - economically (capital flight, capital strike, denial of resources by international lending agencies, etc), or more direct interventions by the USA (as in Nicaragua), or sabotage (as in the case of covert biological warfare against the Cubans). In order to have reforms it is necessary to find some way to insulate oneself from the way in which international capitalism limits, distorts or destroys reforms. We will be operating in the future in the absence of worldwide revolution and hence we are going to have to learn how to implement reforms which on the one hand meet people's needs, move us forward, challenge the structures of the existing system but which, on the other hand, simultaneously allow us to continue to survive.

Maria Alves (founding member of Brazilian Workers' Party) was extremely

stirring in her attempt to share the thinking going on in the Workers Party (PT) concerning socialist strategy. The PT existed not only to win elections but to transform social reality. After narrowly losing the presidential elections Lula caused an outcry in the PT when he stated that he was not prepared to stand for election again and instead wanted to return to the factory and renew his relationship to the base. This caused a fruitful debate as to whether the PT was falling into the electoral route and losing sight of the fact that, although winning elections is very important for a political party, it is not the main objective by which the party should live. The *raison d'être* of the PT was not just to win elections but to participate in elections in a transforming, potentially empowering way, and, through the process of being able to win, creating a new form of administration of power.

The debates this engendered threw up a number of issues. How does a popular political party, engrained in the social movements like the PT, serve as a mediation of power? This requires the party not to think of itself as an instrument of power but as a means to mediate power for the population as a whole (ie beginning the process of building the mechanisms for popular participation and administration). How does one institutionalise, at the level of government, mechanisms for the population as a whole, and not just party members, to participate in the policy decisions, making budgets and resource allocation? How does one ensure that leaders, once in power, do not externalise the oppressor within the movement of the oppressed by reproducing the very forms of domination that it is fighting against? How does one ensure immediate economic benefits for the mass of the people without the effort to do that killing the transforming process? Democratisation is not only about politics; it is also about transforming capitalism right away and ensuring that those who have been totally marginalised get economic benefits like housing, education, basic food, etc. How does one in the transforming process enlighten practice with serious theoretical analysis of capitalism, and the structures of one's reality? The PT is studying the Brazilian capitalist economy with the idea that tactics and strategies of the party have to be based on understanding the political and economic situation right now as well as how the changes in world capitalism are affecting Brazil. How does one transmit these conclusions to the whole population?

The lesson they drew from history was that the means to achieve socialism is as important as the goals; for the means by which power is won and a transformation of society is effected will determine the kind of society one finishes up with. The conference should, therefore, not have been on the issue of 'What is the future of socialism?' but 'What kind of socialism do we want in the future?'

Notes

1. This is a summary of a longer report prepared for CIDMAA (Montreal) and the Economic Trends Group (South Africa). A chronological presentation of each summary address, including some not presented here, is to be found in the larger report which also included a verbatim transcript of the contributions by Slovo and Mzala. We regrettably note the recent death of comrade Mzala. As will be apparent from his presentation this is undoubtedly a setback for the struggle for a democratic socialism in South Africa.

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