

# Discussion

## Is the Marxist Tradition Democratic?

Alan Hunt

Monty Johnstone's criticism of *Marxism and Democracy*<sup>1</sup> (*Marxism Today* Aug 1981) prompts me to reply. I do so not to defend the book (that must stand or fall on its content) but because Monty's approach throws into sharp relief an important problem that confronts the contemporary communist movement. His criticisms amount to a defence of Lenin and an insistence on the contemporary significance of Lenin's ideas. My aim is to open up a wider discussion of the question: what is the relevance of Lenin for contemporary socialism?

Before considering this question it is important to stress that Monty and myself have been and still are in broad political agreement. I acknowledge Monty as having played a major role in the struggle against Stalinism, for the democratisation of the Communist Party and in the development of the strategy of the *British Road to Socialism*. We have both been active exponents of what has come to be called Eurocommunism.

Monty's review reveals an important underlying tension within Eurocommunism. Monty is anxious to retain and to develop much of the legacy of Lenin, whilst I believe it is necessary to recognise that there is a fundamental incompatibility between Lenin and the basic principles of Eurocommunism. Such is the authority of Lenin's name within the communist movement that it is a risky and unpopular undertaking to argue that in important respects it is not possible to reconcile Lenin with the basic principles of the *British Road*. Yet such an undertaking is, I believe, urgently needed.

It should be stressed that what is at stake is Lenin. Monty and I agree that 'Leninism' or 'Marxism-Leninism' is not the legacy of Lenin, but of the subsequent deification undertaken by and in the name of Stalin to give a false legitimacy to the anti-socialist and anti-democratic theory and practice of Stalinism.

Two comments on Monty's method of argument are necessary. He defends Lenin by selective quotation from the texts; Monty should realise that Lenin, like anyone else who wrote a great deal, can be quoted to 'prove' anything. Monty is guilty of emphasising the positive while ignoring the negative. There is little to be gained from



trading quotes. Too much discussion in the communist movement proceeds in this fashion; not only does it prove very little, it is also elitist because, like religions, it reserves 'interpretation' for those with expert knowledge of the texts. More serious is Monty's tendency to explain the unpalatable (eg, the suppression of opposition parties in Russia after 1920) as a result of 'particular circumstances'. Such a method rules out the exploration of an organic connection between historical development and the theories or policies that have formed that reality. For too long the actual development of socialism has been obscured by resort to 'mistakes' or 'particular circumstances'.

### Bourgeois democracy

The central thesis of the *British Road to Socialism*, and other non-insurrectionary socialist strategies, envisages a transition to socialism based upon a continuity with the institutions of bourgeois democracy. This thesis is diametrically opposed to Lenin's insistence on the necessity of the socialist revolution 'smashing' the bourgeois state and replacing it with a state of a new kind (based on the Soviets).<sup>2</sup> The acceptance of this model was made by Lenin himself the central tenet of communism; its acceptance became a condition of affiliation to the Third International.

Lenin persistently counterposed the Soviet model to bourgeois democracy, the dictatorship of the proletariat versus parliamentary democracy. The error in Lenin's analysis resulted from his failure to develop an adequate analysis of bourgeois democracy. It is significant that this same absence is also to be found in Marx despite the fact that he lived and worked in Britain during the period of the development of parliamentary democracy from 1832 to the 1880s. For Lenin bourgeois

democracy was a 'trick' that granted democracy to the bourgeoisie but denied it to the subordinate classes.

The persistence and viability of parliamentary democracies over the last hundred years demonstrates the error of Lenin's analysis that the rise of imperialism heralded a necessary move towards political reaction and the collapse of bourgeois democracy. It is possible to understand how in the period 1914-18 Lenin came to form this view. But history has shown him to be *wrong*. Crucially the rise of fascism and World War II demonstrated that bourgeois democracy was the most successful general form and that the 'exceptional state' forms of fascism are inherently unstable. The problem that presents itself in the developed capitalist world is to reject the view that socialism will come about when bourgeois democracy lurches further and further towards reaction. On the contrary the problem concerns how socialism can be the victor in the competition of political values and policies *within* the framework of bourgeois democracy. To the solution of this problem Lenin and his ideas have little or nothing to contribute.

### Wrong — on two counts

There are two fundamental tenets of Lenin which must be rejected. The first concerns the nature of the transition to socialism. Lenin's perspective is consciously *insurrectionary*, that is he sees developing class struggle as culminating in a single historical moment in which the seizure of political power becomes possible and necessary. The strategy of the *British Road* is non-insurrectionary; it posits no single moment when power passes from one class to another. It does not assume that 'the state' is a unitary entity that can be captured in a single action. On the contrary it recognises a succession of stages that will mark an accumulation of diverse forms of power that will make possible an increasing socialist content in economic, social and political life.

The second issue follows from the first. To achieve socialism under the conditions of advanced capitalism does *not* mean replacing bourgeois democracy and its institutions by socialist democracy with a new institutional structure (whether Soviets or some other alternative). On the contrary the strategy requires the development and extension of bourgeois democracy; whilst transformations in the institutions and practices of bourgeois democracy are envisaged the perspective radically departs from the slogan of 'smashing the bourgeois state and the counterposing of bourgeois and socialist democracy'.

In these two crucial respects the strategies

that have been developed in the advanced capitalist societies of Western Europe depart radically from the views of Lenin. It is to resort to theology to attempt to reconcile these positions with those of Lenin. To attempt such a reconciliation can only obscure the exploration and concrete application of Eurocommunist politics in the varied concrete circumstances of the national contexts in which these strategies are being struggled for.

Monty Johnstone is most anxious to insist on Lenin's commitment to democracy. He relies on an appeal to the specific conditions in the Soviet Union after 1917 to explain as 'temporary' the departures from democracy that occurred during Lenin's lifetime. Whilst there is evidence from Lenin's writing towards the end of his life that he was anxious about the trajectory of Soviet democracy his concern expressed *itself* around the personalities of the rival contenders for political power (Stalin versus Trotsky, etc). There is no recognition that anti-democratic trends that were consolidated by Stalin were the result of the one-party system which Lenin had inaugurated and of the concept of 'the leading role of the Party' he had himself formulated.

For too long British Communists have criticised 'the mistakes' of the Soviet Union

(eg, invasions of Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan, administrative repression of political critics, etc). We must abandon the illusion that the errors of particular leaders explain the long run trends exhibited in the Socialist societies that have come into existence since 1917. The anti-democratic character of the 'actual socialist societies' is inescapable. To analyse this historical reality cannot lay sole responsibility at the feet of Lenin, but neither can we allow his personal prestige to exempt his thought from critical scrutiny.

### Gramsci

Monty is very critical of the discussion of Gramsci in *Marxism and Democracy*. He objects to the counter-posing of Gramsci to Lenin by myself and others. Monty proceeds by citing the points on which Gramsci was at one with Lenin. Such an argument is literally true and was not denied in the chapters complained of. The political thought of Gramsci was developed within the context of Lenin's influence with the communist movement. What now has to be stressed is that the implications of Gramsci's ideas are in conflict with the framework provided by Lenin in which they developed. Thus whilst Gramsci acknowledged his debt to Lenin for the concept of 'hegemony', the way in which Gramsci expanded and developed this

concept struggles to break through the narrower content of Lenin's own concept. The necessary and logical trajectory of Gramsci's thought comes into ever sharper tension with Lenin's ideas. Thus to argue as Monty does that Gramsci personally agreed with Lenin on certain matters is an issue of limited historical interest; it fails to see ideas as always struggling to go beyond the conditions of their initial creation. This is clearly recognised by all with respect to Marx; but it is true also of Gramsci.

What then is at stake is Monty's insistence that contemporary Marxism 'can only be achieved by building on the foundations' laid by Marx, Engels and Lenin. Was it not Marx himself who stressed that the ideas of earlier generations hang like heavy weights on the present? What needs to be discussed and debated is how much of the past ideas of socialism are relevant and valuable in addressing the problems of the present. The appeal of continuity, to the lineage of Marx, Engels, Lenin may be comforting, but comfort is the enemy of creative thinking. D

<sup>1</sup> A Hunt (ed) *Marxism and Democracy*, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> This position only became clearly and unambiguously formulated by the summer of 1917; but it was defended unwaveringly by Lenin thereafter.

**The Leninist**  
THEORETICAL JOURNAL FOR COMMUNISTS.  
articles on: **A.E.S, IRELAND & POLAND**



Winter issue out now. £1.25p including postage from The Leninist Magazine, PO Box 429, London NW 11.

The Polytechnic of Central London

Cultural and Community Studies Unit  
**A Re-evaluation of Marxist Materialism: Does Marxism Demand Atheism?**  
Study Day, Saturday 12 December 1981

**Seminars on Marxism and Religious Belief**  
Three seminars, Saturdays: 5 December 1981, 20 March and 19 June 1982.  
Course Tutor: Irene Brennan

Further details and application forms from:  
Short Course Unit, PCL, 309 Regent Street, London W1R 8AL.  
Tel: 01-580 0099 (24-hour Answerphone).

pc

**See RUSSIA at it's best!**

FROM **£210** 8-15 days all inclusive  
Autumn/Winter/Spring Holidays



**NOVEMBER CELEBRATIONS**  
see the spectacular civil parades

**RUSSIAN WINTER FESTIVAL**  
traditional & fabulous fun

Air departures (London) from October 3

For a super selection of unique holidays in the USSR (inc 1st class hotels, excursions no surcharges) send for the colourful new brochure.

Phone, call or write (24 hour answer phone)  
**Intourist Moscow Limited**  
292 Regent Street, London W1R 7PQ Tel: 01-580 4974 AIDA Member

Please send me the free INTOURIST Autumn/Winter 81/82 Brochure

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_

**INTOURIST**  
the International Tour People for the USSR