

WHAT DOES MARXISM MEAN TODAY?

by Dr. Faysel Darraj

*My verandas are high
Yet, I can not see the sea
How low it is.....*

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Questions Concerning Marxism after the Grand Failure

A mixture of sorrow and bewilderment haunts those who have been Marxists and fought for the realisation of Marxism. To deal with a pessimistic situation optimistically is perhaps part of Marxism. Yet this does not dispell legitimate concerns and fears. These remain, daunting minds accustomed to honestly repeating that "the character of the 20th century is the transition from capitalism to socialism." It is there, disturbing an ideology which used to be learned by heart in Lenin's happy sentence: "Marxism is extremely powerful because it says the truth." But the truth, at the moment, is broken and splintered. Some listen to the beat of the pieces and let out noisy gushes of laughter which reach the oppressed and motivate them to rethink their destitution.

Nevertheless, the restless questioner may shed his sorrow if he actually goes into the logic of Marxism, i.e., if he remains Marxist in explaining the causes which have led to the defeat of his Marxist project. Such an approach may follow one of two formulae or combine them. The first formula contends that in assessing phenomena, Marxism differs from pragmatism. While pragmatism sees victory in the achievement of profit and interest, and revolves around profit and loss; Marxism concentrates, from beginning to end, on defending what is correct without getting entrapped in the limits of victory and defeat, because the very essence of victory, if there is any, lies in adequately defending correct positions.

An explanation for the current situation may, now or in the future, be found in the relationship between theory and practice, whereby study of the causes which led to the grand failure of socialism becomes an urgent necessity not only to understand the reasons of default, but to reconstitute Marxism according to its history. The history of the communist movement, in its different manifestations, is but an innate part of Marxism. Without this relationship which may facilitate the process of reconstructing theory and alter its relations, Marxism is doomed to become a dead text, isolated from history; and the dialectical interaction between theory and practice loses its meaning.

In the arena of great confusion in which we have been living for some time, we may find a number of "happy communists," continuing their old spirit and saying, "Marxism has not failed; the failure is the sum of incorrect application." This claim, in its consoling

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simplicity and self-satisfied innocence, borrows from a kind of religious obscurantist justification which rescues the text while condemning people. Such borrowing soon undermines the borrower, because religion promises paradise in the afterlife, while communism

has been promising happiness on earth. Acquittal of Marxist texts does not save Marxism; what is needed is not protecting the purity of the texts but opening broader horizons for the masses.

I. Marxism: Historical mistake or logical necessity?

When Reagan spoke of communism, he considered it an incidental disease infecting the human body which, sooner or later, will recover and be restored to health. Capitalist Europe's press has observed the earthquake which caused the collapse of "the Eastern camp," saying: "Four decades after the collapse of fascism, the corresponding collapse of communism has come." In both cases, communism is considered a voluntary invention imposed by despotic human will. This is not at all true. From an overall human point of view, Marxism represents a project which satisfies humans' dream of justice, equality and fair rule. Hence, utopia comes before Marxism. Epistemologically, Marxism is a synthesis of previous theoretical knowledge; there was a certain accumulation of human cognition prior to Marxism.

Utopia is a human perspective, a moment of perfect justice in an unforeseen future visited by man depending on his yearning and inclination. Plato's Republic is an example; the texts of Thomas Moore and St. Augustine are similar examples. Utopia is a non-existent place, an imaginary kingdom administered by an ideal government. Although such a kingdom never exists in reality, it is an expression of a certain human desire. "Utopias are nothing but realities which await maturation," said Lanartine. Scientific strivings for justice

were never free from utopian aspects; there are examples in the works of Saint Simon, Fourier and Owen, those three men of extravagant imagination who called for a socialism in which utopia blended with science. Engels said, "Scientific socialism has been built on the

shoulders of Saint-Simon, Fourier and Owen who, despite their extravagant imagination and the utopian character of their beliefs, are considered among the greatest minds of all ages who have brilliantly explored infinite ideas which now prove to be scientifically correct and true."

In this sense, both science and utopia contribute to defining the significance of Marxism. Marxism is simultaneously the negation of utopia and its continuation.

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Although Marxism, as stated in Engels' *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* puts borders and distinctions between utopia and science, it has always admitted that there are certain "socialist" features in all the utopian ideas which motivated popular uprisings, those of the peasants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in particular. In the relationship between Marxism and utopia, the visions of justice and equality of Marxism are clearly reflected. Reflected also is that noble spirit which has motivated millions of people to raise the banner of Marxism. In fact, Marxism objectively represented an inevitable and urgent human need, and simultaneously a logical and historical necessity.

In a sense, Marxism is a continuation of the utopias which in their successive visionary ideal "republics" condensed the dreams of the deprived at all times of a time with no exploitation and no alienation. While inheriting utopia as a collective human dream, Marxism continued and elaborated the previous theoretical feats which have defended human dignity, from the heritage of the Greek philosophers (Epicurus) to the Renaissance. When Lenin wrote about the three sources of Marxism, he confirmed the roles of German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism in the formulation of Marxist theory. Marxism is not an accidental theoretical fabrication; it is a qualitative transformation of mankind's heritage of enlightenment in its loftiest form.

In a letter to his friend Joseph Weydemeyer in 1852, Marx wrote: "....And now as to myself, no credit is due

to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them.... What I did that was new was to prove: (1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*, (2) that the *class struggle necessarily leads to the dictatorship of the proletariat*, (3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*." Marx's letter shows

the great human effort which lay behind the formulation of Marxism where the names of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Gramsci and Althusser occupy a wide place, without cancelling other names such as Spinoza, Descartes, Hegel, Kant, Feuerbach etc. Consequently Marxism is not an absolute beginning; it is a development of previous thought. At the same time, Marxism is not a completely finished theory, because it is defined by reality not vice versa. Just as previous thought had contributed to Marxism, there would be subsequent thought rectifying and innovating Marxism. At any given moment, Marxism, stands as a collective theoretical edifice produced by history in a definite form, and the subsequent history undertakes the mission of reproducing it in a new form.

II. Science and Politics: Theory and the Working Class

Without contemplation, classical Marxism may declare that Marxism is the most important event in history — a meaningless statement because the statement which makes sense is the following: The alliance of Marxism with the working class has been a distinct historical event where theory finds its instrument of realisation in the working class, and the latter finds its proper political practice

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device in the former. Scientific production had been monopolised by the dominant classes wielding power and rationalising their action in a dichotomy of oppression and demagoguery. Despotism suppressed

whoever would evade its means of deceit and fraud. Marxism came to assign a new task to science, to put science at the service of the oppressed. It stated that the real mission of science was to rehabilitate those who actually build the edifice of human civilization.

Marxism is not a revolution because of its assumed new scientific findings. What makes it a revolution in science and an instrument for social revolution is its unity with both the working class and other social forces which are striving for an alternative society. Without such unity, Marxism becomes a neutral academic affair; even the historical significance of its emergence disappears, because Marxism, in the final analysis, is a definite type of political practice, a theory seeking the transformation and not only the interpretation of the world, as Marx himself says in *Theses on Feuerbach*. From the Marxist point of view it is impossible to transform any society — and politics is the science of social transformation, without a scientific explanation of the constellation of social relations which define the formation of the given society. Marxism is the theory which sheds light on the different levels of reality from the view point of transforming that reality at its different levels, a transformation that is carried out by active human forces.

There is an imagined golden relationship between political action and the science which illuminates its path, explaining the different levels and distinguishing what is accidental from what is essential and substantial. Thus, political action almost appears to be always correct and successful, because it finds in revolutionary science a guarantor and clear reference capable of avoiding mistakes. Yet, the question remains: Who guarantees that the agent of political action correctly grasps the theory? Or, what are the features of the required theoretical consciousness which can re-

cognise both the assets and liabilities of a theory? Another question emerges: If what is really historically new is the unity between the working class and Marxism, what are the required practices that

would enable the worker to assimilate Marxism which is bourgeois science in its highest form of transformation and transcendence? Here emerges the concept of the communist party which can, at a certain moment, be embodied in an effective collective intellect, and guided by an enlightened and well-informed mind like that of Gramsci or Lenin, but can also, at another moment, be a restoration of all the traditions practices through a trivial bureaucrat knowing nothing of either theory or practice, or through a huge bureaucrat speaking about socialism and continuing to be a despotic king.

III. From Party and Theory to Bureaucracy and Ideology

What is the Marxist definition of the meaning of theory? It can be approached in different ways. When dialectical materialism stresses the primacy of practice over theory, it stresses at the same time that theory, when practical, rules out stagnation. When Gramsci writes about the collective intellectual, he affirms that theoretical production is an action which goes beyond individuals; it is the mirror of the creativity of the entire communist party. Gramsci's statement involves the recognition of debate, plurality of thinking, as well as critique; it involves the acceptance of democracy as a necessity for the production of objective knowledge. Lenin, on the other hand, stresses the dual nature of the thesis in the theory of reflection where cognition reflects objective reality, while reflecting at the same time the history of science which has ever been dealing with reality and has produced information about it. Lenin's thesis requires specialization, re-reading the whole history of science from a materialist point of view.

We grasp here three concomitant elements in the production of theoretical knowledge, which is necessary to enlighten the practices of the communist party: theory denies stagnation; the production of knowledge is multi-dimensional; and specialization is one of the conditions for producing knowledge. These elements seem logical and sound until the construction of the "New Prince", the communist party according to Gramsci, is completed. The realization of the above elements presupposes the existence of a golden party that fully admits the authority of science, demo-

cracy and change. Those who recognise change in the world should admit the necessity of accepting changes in the internal structure of the party. Here things get confused; they may lose their significance in the case of the bureaucratic party which glorifies sameness. Yet there remains the question: Why does the bureaucrat refuse change and transformation?

Bureaucracy is manifested as an administrative-hierarchical tendency which settles all problems through orders from above, formulated by an elite which decides what is permitted and what is prohibited. The tragedy does not lie in the decision itself, but in the habit of issuing decision by leaders addicted to being in positions of leadership. Such a leader is nothing but the sum of his daily manners which he is incapable of getting rid of. By way of provocation, one may say the bureaucracy is the despotism of the leadership's habits, or the despotism of leadership converted into daily manners. The problem lies not only in a form of static behaviour which sometimes assumes the proportions of a caricature and tends towards the defence of subjective interests dictated by leadership rituals. We face two issues: the leadership psychology of an individual who is fond of issuing orders and refuses any dialogue, while clinging to the material benefits and prestige related to the aura of leadership. The two elements combine in refusal of any kind of criticism or proposal for change whereby the role of the bureaucrat becomes the defence of stagnation. The essence of this is idealism on the philosophical level, despotism on the political level, ideological conservatism and organizational arbitrariness.

At all these levels, the lessons of practice are lost, and creative collective action collapses, while cognitive specialisation is marginalised, all because of one essential reason: In bureaucratic practice, leadership transforms into an authority that determines the significance of both politics and theory. All the theoretical, political, artistic, aesthetic and scientific levels combine in the person of the leader.

Some may argue that the central nature of decision-making and the necessity of maintaining the unity and solidity of an organisation require the existence of a

center which draws the line between what is right and what is wrong. Yet, the problem is not that simple.

The fact is that bureaucratic practice produces subjective interests, as well as the means of defending them, and such subjective interests take precedence over grasping the situation which has produced bureaucratism. In this sense, Marxism in its bureaucratic manifestation is nothing but a closed authoritarian philosophy, i.e., idealism behind the mask of materialism. Moreover, if class struggle in society has produced the working class party and its Marxist theory, a definite type of class struggle within the communist party has led to both bureaucracy and authoritarian Marxism.

Bureaucracy which has reduced Marxism to a caricature of itself, based on a set of simple quotations, is the reason for the poverty of Marxism and its lack of progress in the process of life. It is the factor which has converted Marxism from an instrument of explanation and enlightenment into a means of vindication and deceit, from the "non-capitalist way of transition", to the myth of "the priority of the human over the class," through the slogan of "existing socialism" where theory has been converted into a diplomatic guise or an ideology covering facts and interests, while distorting the truth.

The problem acquires a more tragic dimension when the concepts of party, state and revolution are theoretically approached. The classics of Marxism (pre-Lenin) gave only a few hints concerning these concepts. Instead of elaborating those hints and raising them to the level of theory, the few references have been distorted according to the needs of the various authorities. The party as a political expression existed before the emergence of workers' parties. When early Marxists demanded a party of a new kind, they did not intend to introduce new slogans and concepts into an existing human totality heading for revolution. Their aim was to carry out a qualitative and quantitative transformation within this human totality. Perhaps this is what Gramsci referred to when he said, "every communist is a leader," "every individual is a philosopher" and "everyone is an instructor and a scientist." All kinds of hierarchy should be

eliminated; all distinctions erased between those who are directed and those who direct; an organic unity should be established among all those belonging to the communist party. The defeat of hierarchy among people, the negation of relations of dominance/submission, the elevation of reason, will intellectual interaction and moral and ethical integrity, etc., are the very essence of the party in the Marxist sense.

Consequently, it can be stated that the strength of the party which expounds revolution does not lie in its theoretical and ideological homogeneity and conformity, but in its intellectual pluralism and dialogue which converges on aim but debates the way of achieving it. Moreover, the strength of the revolutionary party does not ultimately lie in numbers and discipline, but in its relations of dialogue with all the social forces that seek change. Consequently, the strength of the party is manifested in its capacity to create many popular committees whose relationship to the party is defined by the dialectic of simultaneous connection and autonomy. Such committees criticize the party and are criticized by it. They constitute the necessary popular control which can denounce any negative factional phenomenon.

In as much as the party cannot survive politically without popular control and combatting bureaucracy and relations of dominance/submission, then the collective theoretical work of the party stems from the following sources: study of the psychology, problems, culture, temperament and habits of the potential or existing popular movement. It is impossible to approach people through a language they do not know, through methods that are alien to them; the people can be communicated with only through their actual needs. Yet, Marxists should see the other side of the coin: If the people are not the object of an experiment or a mute quantity of human beings, the party should benefit from the popular culture after its transformation, as well as from all the input related to the interests and perspectives of the whole people. Both are impossible unless the party is ready to fight bureaucracy in practice and to make the study of its own history, as well as that of related parties, an essential theoretical task. Knowing oneself is the basis of wisdom, said Socrates. The

party which does not know itself and is ignorant of the circumstances of its emergence and development, is doomed to perish without being aware of the fact that it is dying.

IV. Seeking Power or Creating a Social Alternative?

The history of the working class movement has known a famous slogan: the tactic of class vs. class. The meaning is extremely simple: The working class should overthrow the capitalist class and assume power in its stead. This tactic suffers from a sectarian tendency, but primarily from a deficient political aspiration, because it supposes that the communist party's role is first to assume power and then to achieve the liberation of the new human being in the new society. The question is how the new society can be created by the old human beings; and whether the communist goal is power or the creation of the new human being with a new perception of taking power. We might say that the method of taking power defines the eventual nature of that power, even if it appears otherwise. The dream of seizing power is a traditional practice; to start from authority and then descend to the level of society is similar to starting from reason in order to later descend to reality.

The previous perception may have been a mixture of traditional thinking, romanticism and strong doses of ignorance about the history of societies. The communists' assumption of power in a particular country does not mean that the society concerned has become communist. The Justice for which communists have fought in many places does not mean that all honest people accept communist justice. In other words, the communist project, from a Marxist point of view, is not defined by the ultimate goal, but by the sum of the methods and instruments leading to it. Sergy Eisenstein says, "The search for truth should be through truly genuine instruments." If what is required is the building of the communist society which establishes justice freedom and beauty, then the diffusion of these values is the only way leading to communist power. This is what Gramsci meant when he formulated the concept of hegemony where the communist party becomes dominant before assuming power. From

the Marxist point of view, communists do not assume power and then begin to transform society. Rather they begin to transform society in order to be able to assume power.

In this context, we see the difference between the tactic of assuming power and the project of creating a socio-cultural alternative. The first represents a traditional perception of both politics and state power. When state power is attained through traditional methods, this same authority resorts to traditional means to perpetuate the ruler/ruled dichotomy. To thus reduce the political project of the working class to the mere replacement of the existing political power with another is a traditional practice that reduces all social relationships to authoritarian ones, marginalizing society and the concepts of social transformation. Total traditionalism emerges if the party is bureaucratic, a capitalist political elite having been replaced by another elite which speaks of socialism.

Traditional perception arises from authority and power, while Marxist perception arises from the socio-cultural alternative which aims to create a broad effective social bloc committed to new moral, cultural, intellectual and aesthetic values different from those produced by the dominant class. Since the method of assuming power determines the substance of power, the achievement of power relying on masses committed to alternative values necessitates an authority with alternative values, based on a free human collectivity capable of criticizing the errors of the authority. This authority serves as a point of reference, or even a mirror of the collectivity which defends the authority because, by so doing, it defends itself. Theoretically and in brief, one may say that from a Marxist point of view, the assumption of power requires achieving qualitative social progress to provide the conception of how to achieve power. Broad social acceptance of the communist project is an indispensable condition for planning to reach power. Otherwise, the project is doomed to deteriorate into traditional politics of repression. The questions posed by the concepts of hegemony and the cultural-moral alternative make democracy and political and intellectual plurality permanent qualities of any political project claiming allegiance to Marxism.

Marxism takes its point of departure in the emancipated human rather than power, in the popular dimension rather than the elitist, in the initiative of the masses rather than tactics. I don't say Marxism begins with everybody, but it arises from democratic conditions which

the point of view of the present is the basis of renewing thought. Reading from a Marxist point of view facilitates full understanding of history on the one hand, and rectification of Marxist theory on the other. This includes omitting what is outdated, because thinking that does

In its theoretical content and practical form, class struggle defines the identity of Marxism as a class philosophy. Affiliation to Marxism, therefore, means being capable of analyzing the different mechanisms of class struggle and of actually intervening in this process. This perspective frees Marxism from being a system or even a philosophy. It is a theoretical-political intervention in specific conditions in order to produce knowledge from the viewpoint of the oppressed. When the conditions change, the theoretical instruments are altered. When the situation of the oppressed changes, the very language of theory is altered, because the role of Marxism is not to accumulate knowledge, but to motivate the oppressed for revolution.

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allow everyone to share in decision-making and initiative. Without democracy opening minds and clarifying all questions, things lose their identity and meaning. Truth is based neither on the masses, theory or leading party, but on free social movement which redefined the masses, theory and vanguard party.

The absence of an alternative culture of values, formulated by the people, explains the horrible collapse of ruling parties in Eastern Europe, as well as the masses' sick rush after capitalist consumer values. The masses opted for the unknown, because they rejected what was known to them in the form of traditional authoritarian practice and failure to present a cultural-ethical alternative, since the authorities perception of culture, ethics and humanity had remained traditional.

V. How to be a Marxist now?

This question would have seemed odd a few years ago. A Marxist is a militant who adopts Marxism as the basis of his thinking and political choice. What was once a maxism now remains so only to those who have lost their intuition. Something extremely serious has shaken the world and left its tragic impact in many fields. This calls for common sense to reread Marxism in a new way.

Marxism cannot now be renewed only through rereading its heritage and the history of the international working class movement. Essentially, it requires analysis of all the basic historical moments when Marxism was close to or far from the masses, respectively. Marxist renewal can be achieved through explaining the historical and social causality behind both the convergence and divergence between Marxism and the popular movement. In this sense, reading history from

not accept the ideas of omission and addition does not deserve to be called theory.

Marxists do not deny the brilliant writings of Lenin, Gramsci, Brecht, Althusser, etc. Yet, learning these text by heart does not rejuvenate Marxism, because the momentous question lies in identifying the causes which contributed to their current defeat. It is certain that the decline of Marxism is not due to "bad times", but rather to failure to keep apace with socio-economic developments, both in the sense of concepts that are absent and others that have become obsolete. Some may get angry upon hearing that parts of Marxism have aged, but this is not a question of orthodox believing. Marxism says that everything changes, transforms and perishes. What prevents Marxism itself from complying with this thesis? Without going into all the issues involved, we can say that it is infantile to believe that defending marxism means defense of its written teachings. On the contrary, real defense of Marxism means seeking the social, political and cultural conditions whereby Marxism can be materialized as a class philosophy. Marxism has no value if distanced from its political role and its

This is why reading the history of the popular movement is the basis for developing Marxism as a theory. Asserting the concept "popular movement," in its overt or potential form, means taking a certain distance from the class concept, because the popular movement is made up of all the social forces which have no say in shaping their daily existence. The popular movement is not solely defined by economic criteria, but primarily by the nature of the relationship between the people and the ruling authority, and the people's role in the authority's decision-making. The popular movement comprises social groups that are economically exploited, politically repressed and ideologically subdued. The popular aspect is, therefore, derived from the class concept and transcends simple economic definition; it is a relationship of dominance and submission. The assertion of the popular-patriotic-national dimension is an attempt to break away from a narrow and arbi-

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role of social transformation. More precisely, the very identity of Marxism is determined by its analysis of the forms of class struggle in a specific society, as well as its practical, political materialization within this struggle. It is a unity of theory and practice; when either of the two is absent, the unity collapses and the meaning of the whole is distorted.

trary perception of the working class as an existing class or a class created by party decision.

The potential question is: Is Marxism the philosophy of the working class or rather a popular philosophy? Doesn't the shift from the working class position to that of the people involve a change in Marxism? It can be simply said that

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Marxism is not defined by its class origin, but rather by its visionary perspective of an emancipated society free of classes and exploitation. Such an approach allows Marxism to freely penetrate the future where scientific criteria and moral visions merge. What is required is not the protection of Marxist texts, but defense of the goal which Marxism has been striving to achieve. The perspective of the Marxist project is to be preserved, while change should involve the texts that have elaborated this perspective. Saying that Marxism is still alive compels us to admit that parts of it need to be changed.

VI. To be a Marxist in the Third World today!

Regardless of whether Marxism has subsided or spread, the world objectively continues to be governed by the law of class struggle. Thus, being a Marxist means viewing that class struggle objectively governs the world. Class struggle is the decisive link, in the words of Althusser, not only in revolutionary forces' political practice, but also in theoretical and cultural interventions. In confirming the class struggle, Althusser recalls Mao Tse Tung's saying: "Never forget classes and the class struggle." This has its effects on the economic, political and ideological levels, as well as on the national cause.

If some of those who deviated from Marxism were for a time spreading the idea that humanism takes priority over class, the Gulf war erased all such miserable misconceptions. This war raised many questions about the relationship

between the North and South, the center and the periphery, and the resemblance between the national and class aspects in the national liberation process. Under conditions of national liberation struggle, the class position (which is guided by the theory of the working class) fights for national liberation and refuses all forms of dependence. Thus, the class and national positions cannot be separated; they are identical as was asserted by the martyred comrade of the Lebanese Communist Party, Mahdi Amal.

Confronting the imperialist project is a struggle for creating a popular bloc capable of mounting this confrontation.

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Under conditions of dependence and national liberation struggle, this means that revolutionary theory is formulated relying on two inseparable points of reference: understanding the current meaning of imperialism in its class sense, and seeking the means for developing the mass movement that can make use of the accumulation of Third World liberation experience. The particularity of the liberation struggle in our Arab societies requires formulating a new theory, in which Marxism constitutes a fundamental source. In this regard, one should recall the Arab renaissance project which has failed until now. It has called for rationalism, secularism, democracy, a new society, the liberation of women, spreading education and cul-

ture, and separation of church and state. In addition to the experiences of Arab liberation (the Algerian revolution, Nasserism), and pan-Arab thought, there is what can be called the popular religion, which is inherited, ambiguous and contradictory in its writings.

The similarity between our conditions and those of the national struggle in other parts of the Third World, might require us to read up on the experience of the Sandinistas and the African National Congress, as well as Cabral and Franz Fanon. In this sense, it is possible to produce a new theoretical structure, including the legacy of the age of Arab

enlightenment, popular religion, national experience and revolutionary theory of the Third World. Yet this new structure would not fulfill its potential if it were not based on the Marxist approach which takes class struggle as its point of reference in theory and politics. We don't need an new ideological prescription which escapes from the past and claims to be novel, but rather an analysis of the mechanisms of the current class struggle which permits an effective practical intervention in this struggle on the local and international levels. Producing revolutionary thought through practicing revolutionary action, seeking national and human liberation, is the only way to attain the identity of Marxism in a changing world.