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1-1-1959

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Based on a series of broadcasts made over Station KPFA,  
Berkeley, California, February-April, 1959**

Herbert Aptheker

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### Recommended Citation

Aptheker, Herbert, "On the nature of revolution: The Marxist theory of social change. Based on a series of broadcasts made over Station KPFA, Berkeley, California, February-April, 1959" (1959). *PRISM: Political & Rights Issues & Social Movements*. 109.  
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# ON THE NATURE OF REVOLUTION

The Marxist Theory  
of Social Change

By HERBERT APTHEKER

A NEW CENTURY PAMPHLET

25 cents

# ON THE NATURE OF REVOLUTION

## The Marxist Theory of Social Change

Based on a series of broadcasts made over Station KPFA,  
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NEW CENTURY PUBLISHERS: *New York*

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## About the Author

This pamphlet contains the full text of a series of broadcasts made by Dr. Aptheker over Station KPFA, of Berkeley, California, during February, March and April, 1959.

Herbert Aptheker is widely known as a scholar, historian and educator, and is presently the editor of the Marxist monthly, *Political Affairs*. He is the author of several major works including *American Negro Slave Revolts*, *Essays in the History of the American Negro*, *History and Reality*, *The Truth About Hungary*, and *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States*. His latest book, *The Colonial Era*, published in the Spring of 1959, is the first in a multi-volumed history of the formation, growth and development of the United States. He is also the author of numerous pamphlets, the latest of which are *Since Sputnik: How Americans View the Soviet Union*, *Freedom in History*, and *The United States and China: Peace or War?*

Dr. Aptheker served in the Field Artillery for over four years in the Second World War, rising through the ranks from private to major. In 1939, he was awarded a prize in history by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History. He was a Guggenheim Fellow in 1946-47, and is presently director of the Faculty of Social Science, in New York.

# ON THE NATURE OF REVOLUTION

## I: Definition and Source

We may begin our examination of the nature of revolution with the question of whether or not such an inquiry is relevant to our era. We say this for some have insisted that revolution is outmoded in the present epoch. Professor Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for example, in his book, *The Vital Center*—published in 1949—expressed the opinion that “modern science has given the ruling class power which renders mass revolutions obsolete.” That Mr. Schlesinger chose to write this at the very moment when the revolution of the Chinese people had achieved success reflects more than bad timing; it indicates a fundamental misjudgment of the nature of our time and the nature of social revolution.

Surely, the years since 1949—one need only think of the revolutions in Egypt, Viet Nam, Iraq, Venezuela, and Cuba—have demonstrated the absurdity of the idea that because of the developments of technique, or for any other reason, mass revolutions have been rendered obsolete. On the contrary, we are living in an era when the obsolescence of a social order—capitalism, in its imperialist stage—has put revolution on the agenda. We are living, in fact, in the century that is characterized by the transformation of the world from an imperialist-dominated one to a socialist one; this is just as certain as it is certain that, some five hundred years ago, the peoples of Western civilization were living in a time characterized by the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

The developments of improved techniques of destruction and propaganda in the hands of the ruling classes have made necessary some alterations in the tactics of revolution; but, as the events of every passing day confirm, they have not eliminated the process of revolution.

Indeed, our era is the era of revolution par excellence, without precedent in history for the substantive nature of its transforming force, for the quantitative sweep which encompasses whole continents rather than single nations, and for the speed with which it unfolds.

### **Definitions of "Revolution"**

How shall we define this term, "revolution"? The dictionary offers this: "A sudden and violent change in government or in the political constitution of a country, mainly brought about by internal causes." In this definition I find very little with which to agree, though the emphasis upon internal causes as being of prime consequence is valid, I believe. I would rather define revolution as an historical process leading to and culminating in social transformation, wherein one ruling class is displaced by another, with the new class representing, as compared to the old, enhanced productive capacities and socially progressive potentialities. This definition is to be preferred to the other, it seems to me, on many grounds; one is that with the dictionary definition there is no distinction between revolution and counter-revolution. But in my view these are two quite distinct, indeed, opposite phenomena, and any definition that would call both the victory of George Washington and the victory of Francisco Franco by the same name is bound to confuse more than define.

### **Class Rule Versus Change**

The history of mankind is a remarkably dynamic one; change is one of its few constants, including the recurring appearance of changes of such consequence and of such a nature that only the term "revolution," as I have defined it, correctly characterizes them.

When one stops to think about this, it is very nearly miraculous. For consider: Every exploitative ruling class, in the past, everywhere in the world, throughout the thousands of years of recorded history, has held in its hands—since it was the ruling class—effective domination of the society. It has, to begin with, owned the means of production; it has dominated the state apparatus; and it has dominated, also, the ideology and the culture of the society. In certain cases—as, for example, in systems of chattel slavery—ruling classes actually have possessed physically not only the natural and man-made means of production, but also the human producers themselves.

At first glance, surely one would think that such arrangements would defy basic alteration. Where classes control production, communication, education, law, and ideology in general, and the whole state apparatus with its facilities for persuasion and repression, does it not appear that the easiest thing to do would be to maintain such a system? It is no wonder, then, that every exploitative ruling class in the past has insisted that its system, or “way of life,” was splendid and manifestly destined to last forever. But it is a wonder that though every ruling class, in every epoch, everywhere in the world, has insisted upon this “common-sense” view, they have all, everywhere, all the time, been proven wrong.

If revolution were to occur once or twice in human history, it might be explained in terms of “accident,” or some notably irresponsible or inefficient conduct on the part of the particular rulers thus overthrown. But where revolution is the rule, historically speaking, despite all the manifest and not so manifest odds against its attempt, not to speak of its success, would it not appear that there must be some central explanation for this? Would it not appear that there must be some irresistible force, working within all hitherto existing social systems which, despite the apparent omnipotence of the rulers, succeeds in terminating their rule and basically altering those systems?

## **The Roots of Revolution**

What, then, shall we say as to the source of this repeated pro-

cess of revolution? It is due, I think, in the first place, to fundamental and immutable contradictions, or antagonisms, which hitherto have characterized all exploitative social systems. These manifest themselves in the fact that class conflict or class struggle makes up the fundamental dynamic of recorded history, and in that sense represents, as Marx and Engels stated, in *The Communist Manifesto*, "the history of all hitherto existing society."

This contradiction is organic to the society's nature; hence, the process of revolution is part of the process of the very life and development of the society itself. Hence, too, ruling classes, be they as apparently all-powerful as they please, never have been able in the past to prevent their own demise.

At the same time, the contradiction does not manifest itself simply in the decay of the efficacy of the ruling class; it manifests itself, also, in the rising strength, consciousness, and organization of those being ruled. This two-sided feature of the contradiction is reinforcing; it is interpenetrating, each serving simultaneously as cause and effect, as stimulant and result. That is, the relationship between the two elements of the contradiction is dialectical.

This internal contradiction is of basic consequence in explaining the process of revolution. In addition, there is an external contradiction, as it were, which exists in the fact of the uneven development of all hitherto existing social systems. It is a fact that no one system, at an identical stage of development, has ever dominated the globe, nor even such substantial sections of the globe that it has not been in proximity to other social systems, or essentially similar social systems but at different levels of development. This condition produces conflict and antagonism, also, particularly since each of the differing systems or levels is itself parasitic and exploitative. Such external conflict tends to bring pressures to bear upon existing social orders already beset with internal struggle. Again, here, each tends to stimulate the other; that is, the external conflict may exacerbate the internal, or the internal may precipitate the external. The relationship here, as elsewhere, is not simple and need not be direct, and ruling classes are not devoid of capabilities, including the capacity to use external challenges as lightning rods for internal difficulties. But, on the whole, uneven development with resultant conflict tends to intensify the internal



contradictions besetting and finally undoing exploitative ruling classes.

## II: An Illustration From American History

In an effort to illuminate the sources of the revolutionary process, let us turn to the history of our own country and, particularly, to the Second American Revolution—the Civil War, which completed some of the tasks of our First Revolution.

To comprehend the sources of that War, which culminated as revolution, it is necessary to understand what forces drove the dominant elements in the slaveholding class to choose the path of an attempted counter-revolutionary *coup*; for the Civil War, *in origin*, was an attempted counter-revolution. There is a considerable literature, that seeks to make the villain of the piece in this instance Abraham Lincoln, and to insist that he inveigled the rulers of the South into resorting to force—just as, by the way, there is a body of literature that insists Franklin Delano Roosevelt goaded the Imperial Japanese government into bombing Pearl Harbor and, therefore, was the real precipitator of World War II, so far as U.S. involvement is concerned.

Both schools of thought are in error. As for the launching of the Civil War—with which alone we shall deal here—the evidence is overwhelming that the secession movement was plotted by leaders of the slaveholding class for months—in the case of some individuals, for years—prior to the bombing of Fort Sumter. The evidence is overwhelming that these leaders carried out, illegally and against the will of the majority of white Southerners (let alone, the will of the one-third of the population of the South which was Negro), the creation of a so-called Confederate States of America, mustered an army, and ordered contingents of that army to take over arsenals, post-offices, army centers and naval bases belonging to the United States. The evidence is conclusive, also, that these same leaders caused the bombardment of one of the forts which refused to yield, and that, as a result, for several days Fort Sumter was subjected to the force and violence of the Confederate rulers.

## The Slaveholders' Counter-Revolution

The first problem, then, in connection with the source of the Civil War is to understand why the effective leadership of the slaveholding class took this course. They took this path because they had become desperate; they had decided that they had everything to gain and nothing to lose by resorting to counter-revolutionary violence. In the past, when exploitative ruling classes have become convinced that they could not maintain their rule in the old way, they have resorted, when they had the power, to the path of organized violence—that is, to the path of counter-revolution.

The dominant slaveholders in the United States resorted to this in 1860 because they came to the conclusion that if they did not, they would be undone, legally and constitutionally, in the near future. Hence, they calculated, by resorting to counter-revolution, they might succeed in thwarting or significantly delaying their burial which, they were convinced, would be their fate if they abided the results of the 1860 elections.

There were four interpenetrating forces—two essentially internal, and two essentially external—which together drove the dominant elements in the slaveholding class to the desperate expedient of war. These were—to state them summarily first, and then to return for a brief elaboration of each of them; 1) the mounting unrest of the four million Negro slaves and the rising class consciousness and discontent of the majority of non-slaveholding whites in the South; 2) the intensifying contradictions within the economic and social system of plantation slavery itself which drove it towards a voracious expansionism; in turn, this helped precipitate the fundamental questions of the future of the federal lands and the right or wrong of the institution of slavery; 3) the socio-economic transformation north of the Mason-Dixon Line which basically threatened slaveocratic domination over the federal government; and 4) the quantitative and qualitative growth of the Abolitionist Movement.

We turn to the briefest elaboration of each of these elements. The developing discontent of the slave and non-slaveholding whites in the South reached such a crescendo in the 1850's that the slave-

owners actually feared, as they said, the breaking out of civil war at home before they could launch it upon Washington. Slave revolts and plots reached a high point in the decade 1850-1860; other evidences of slave unrest—as flight—reached extraordinary levels in the same period; examples of white participation in and sympathy towards such freedom efforts on the part of the slaves became increasingly frequent in this same decade; and, on the part of the non-slaveholding whites, political and economic organization and demands counter to the interests of the planter class became characteristic of domestic southern politics in the decade prior to secession. This ferment at home was of great significance in creating a sense of desperation on the part of the slaveholding class.

Intensified contradictions within the slave system showed themselves in the rising percentage of whites who were forced out of the slave-holding class in the years just before the Civil War, and in the mounting pressure for new lands with which to increase holdings and further productivity so that the rate of profit might not fall. It also was evident in the continuing compulsion towards expansion, deriving from the necessity to keep the proportion of Negro population to white population at a manageable level. If the area of slavery were ever thoroughly confined, the slaveholders feared—with good reason—that the problem of policing the slaves would become so great as to be self-defeating.

These together constituted fundamental internal contradictory pressures that were challenging the viability of the American slave system. In addition, outside the slave area, the North and West were being transformed by the enormous increase of a free-labor agricultural population, and by the swift rise of industrial capitalism and the growing split among the mercantile bourgeoisie in the North. As to the latter, they had earlier been engaged, especially in New York City, in servicing the planters. But as industry and wheat and corn production developed in the North and gained world-wide markets, a considerable portion of the Northern merchant class switched its prime efforts to transporting and selling free-labor-produced commodities. This change was of great importance in causing a split in the Democratic Party, generally the preferred party of the slaveowners. Thus, a Northern and a Southern Democratic Party finally became crystallized and each ran a candidate in 1860, allowing Lincoln to emerge the victor though

running on a relatively new ticket, and receiving a minority of the votes.

The interests of the classes evolving as a result of this transformation—farmers, workers, industrialists, certain of the merchants—were contrary to those of the slaveowners. These clashing interests manifested themselves in conflicting positions on basic questions of the time—homestead, tariff, internal improvements at federal expense, currency and credit questions, matters of foreign policy. The 1860 defeat, therefore, represented a crushing blow to the slaveocracy and precipitated its act of desperation.

Finally, in considerable part stimulated by the development already sketched, the Abolitionist Movement—a bona-fide revolutionary movement—shed its sectarianism and became a real mass movement. It became politically alert, organizationally responsible and, in much of the North, the decisive balance of power politically and a real force ideologically. This development further terrified the slaveowners and, together with everything else, led them to attempt counter-revolution; that is, to seek the destruction of the bourgeois-democratic Republic and to make permanent, if not supreme, the institution of chattel slavery on the North American continent.

These internal and external forces together drove the regressive class to violence. The Republic was defended, with great vacillation and hesitation, by a coalition of classes more or less hostile to the pretensions of the slaveowners and more or less devoted to the bourgeois-democratic republic. The defense, given the multi-class nature of the coalition, was based on the broadest possible demand—defend the Union, save the Republic! At first, for purposes of unity and cohesion, it was insisted that the question of slavery was irrelevant to the conflict. But, since the ownership of four million slaves was basic to the very definition of the class mounting the counter-revolution, and since it was fundamental to the power of that class, if the assault was to be turned back it was necessary to attack the institution of slavery. Hence, defending ancient liberties—the integrity of the Republic, the sanctity of legal and constitutional procedures—under new conditions, that is, under conditions which saw those liberties being assaulted in an organized manner, it became necessary to forge new freedoms.

Thus, to preserve the Union it was necessary to liberate the slaves; to liberate the slaves, it was necessary to preserve the Union.

With that shift in strategy, the tactical course of the struggle shifted; Negroes, straining to get into the battle were at last allowed to do so, and before Lee surrendered, 250,000 Negro men had fought in Lincoln's Army and Navy and had been of decisive consequence in producing that surrender.

Here, then, in the actualities of U.S. history, was the unfolding of the revolutionary process, to be institutionalized in the 13th and 14th Amendments to the Constitution, confiscating without compensation over three billion dollars worth of private property and laying the groundwork for the continuing effort to achieve real freedom on the part of the Negro masses.

### III: Revolution and Violence

Probably the single most common stereotype in connection with revolution is to equate it with violence. Examples of this abound; the reader will recall that the dictionary definition of revolution began with the words: "A sudden and violent change in government. . . ." Equally common is the posing of peaceful change as contrasted with revolution; for instance, in Kenneth Neill Cameron's introduction to the *Selected Poetry and Prose of Shelley*, the editor summarizes certain of Shelley's views this way: "In regard to the existing situation in England the thing to do is to work first for the reform of parliament, peacefully if possible, by revolution if necessary. . . ."

But the equating of violence with the nature and process of revolution is not correct. Violence may or may not appear in such a process, and its presence or absence is not a determining feature of the definition. How, then, should one view the relationship of violence to revolution?

First, there is the historical view, the view conveyed in Marx' famous observation that "force is the midwife of every old society which is pregnant with the new." This observation, however, is not advocacy; it is observation. It is taking account of the fact—certainly a fact when Marx was writing—that hitherto social changes

sufficiently fundamental to be called revolutions had not occurred peacefully. It is, also, an observation which rules out the adoption of pacifism as an ideology suitable for a revolutionary, but it most certainly does not constitute the advocacy of violence for the revolutionary himself.

That it does not, follows from an examination of the full content of the historical observation anent the relationship between violence and revolution. That observation insists that where violence has accompanied revolutionary culmination, it has appeared because the old class, facing elimination due to social developments, has chosen to postpone its internment by resorting to the violent suppression of the challenging classes and forces. The source of the violence, when it appears, is in reaction; it is in response to that challenge that resistance may be offered and if such resistance is successful then the revolutionary process may come to fruition.

Exactly this course marks the American Revolution, where the colonists pled peacefully for a redress of grievances and for the "rights of Englishmen." These demands were resisted and the rights were not granted by the Crown. As the demands persisted, and the organized strength of the movement making those demands grew, the Crown finally moved, in 1775, to the massive, forcible suppression of the entire movement. It was for this purpose that the King sent ten thousand troops to Boston, blockaded the port, and sent detachments of those troops, bayonets fixed, to arrest the leaders of that movement. The use of force came first as an expression of policy by the Crown; the revolutionists turned to force as a last resort and as an act of resistance to the prior-offered force by reaction. The resistance finally was successful and so the Revolution proceeded. Or, as in the case of modern Spain, the effort to secure in that suffering country a Republic with an advanced bourgeois-democratic system was met by the organized force and violence of feudal and fascistic groups both in Spain, and in Germany and Italy. There, the movement toward significant social change was met by reactionary violence and the resistance to that violence was not successful; hence, Franco's counter-revolutionary assault succeeded, and Spain's crucifixion continues.

Where one has a complete absence of any possibility of struggle for social progress other than through violence, he has an alto-

gether different situation. This, for example, was true in the slave south in our own country. The slaves were forbidden all rights and were, in fact, the property of the master class. They were forbidden to learn to read and write; they were forbidden to own anything or go anywhere or do anything without the express permission of the masters. In such cases, individual resistance could only show itself in flight or being "uppity," as the masters put it, or in desperate acts of violence. And in such a system, organized struggle could only take the form of strikes, sabotage, or—and this was quite common—conspiracy and insurrection. But even here, the point I am insisting upon in connection with the relationship between the revolutionary process and violence is not really refuted, for in cases such as chattel slavery, the use of violence still originates with reaction. For in slavery, one has a system that is based upon the exercise of naked violence or the clear threat of its instant use. In slavery, the slaves were forcibly held in subjection, and the system of slavery was begun by the forcible enslavement of the original victims.

The slaves, then, in an almost literal sense, were what John Brown called them—that is, "prisoners of war." Here again, then, the actual source of the violence and the persistent policy of employing violence characterizes the exploitative and oppressing class, not the class seeking basic social change.

A similar situation prevails with fascism; with, for example, the condition that existed in Hitler Germany. There monopolists ruled by making war upon their own population and by the systematic imprisonment, torture, and annihilation of hundreds of thousands of those opposing fascism. Here, too, monopoly ruled not only by constant violence within, but also by a policy of constant and violent aggression without. In such a situation, where violence appears among those seeking real change, it once again appears only in response to the systematic resort to violence by the forces of reaction.

Since the source of violence rests with reaction, whether or not it will appear depends not so much upon the will to use it but rather upon the capacity to use it. This is why, in the history of Marxism, there have been differing evaluations, at different times, as to the possibilities of the peaceful or relatively peaceful transi-

tion to Socialism. In the latter part of the 19th century both Marx and Engels thought this might be possible in the United States, Great Britain, and Holland, largely because of the well-developed bourgeois-democratic systems prevailing there and the relative absence, then, of highly concentrated military establishments. With significant shifts in the situation, such estimates altered, as when, during World War I—and its intense militarization—Lenin asserted that peaceful transition was impossible. But it is to be noted that this was an estimate arising out of a consideration of the strength of reaction and its readiness and capacity to use violence. When this same Lenin thought he saw, in April, 1917, a profound decay in the strength of reaction in Russia, he projected the possibility, then, in Russia, of the advance peacefully to Socialism.

It may be noted that the Communist Party of Portugal, in a recent policy declaration, affirmed that it saw the possibility in that country of the peaceful transition to Socialism—and this in a country where fascism rules. The estimate is based on the relationship of forces in the world and in Europe today; on the exceedingly precarious hold that Franco still has upon power in Spain, and the developing force of public opinion and anti-fascist organization in Portugal. Here, again, the opinion is based upon an estimate of the power of reaction to resort, effectively, to force in order to prevent its own replacement.

Related to this, is the fact that today in the United States, strikes are infrequently accompanied by violence—although it must be said that as the recession and unemployment show little signs of slackening off, appearances of violence in strike episodes are becoming less rare. Yet, as a whole, strikes and picketing today are not accompanied by violence. But twenty years ago, the opposite was true; just twenty years ago, a picket line anywhere of any size and duration almost automatically meant violent assault by police or hoodlums, or others, in the employ of the bosses. The change in this matter in our time is not due to the development of tender hearts among the police or among the bosses. The change is due, basically, to the alteration in the relationship of forces *vis-à-vis* labor and capital—it is due to the fact that twenty years ago there were perhaps six or seven million trade-unionists and today there



are seventeen or eighteen millions. There are other reasons for the change, including the growth of class collaborationism, but this is the basic one; the bosses have the same will to smash genuine trade unionism now as they did twenty years ago, but they do not have the same power to do so today as they had then.

We conclude, therefore, that violence is not an organic part of the definition of the process of revolution, and that the conventional presentation which equates violence with revolution is false. And we conclude that the conventional view which places the onus for the appearance of violence in connection with basic social change upon the advocates of such change is altogether wrong; where violence does accompany revolutionary transformation, it owes its origin and takes its impulse from the forces of reaction which seek to drown the future in blood.

Most certainly, genuine revolutionists of the 20th century are not advocates of force and violence; they are advocates of fundamental social change, often faced—as in Trujillo-land and Nyasa-land—with the organized and systematized force and violence of the supporters of outmoded and criminal social systems.

#### **IV: Revolution and Democracy**

Next to that stereotype which identifies revolution with violence, none is more widespread than that which places revolution as antithetical to democracy. One hears frequently the question of social change posed as being between two alternatives—either the democratic or the revolutionary—with the clear inference that the two are mutually exclusive. The idea of revolution as being the opposite of democracy, carries with it also the view of the revolutionary process as being fundamentally a conspiratorial one.

Such ideas are in line with the Hollywood-version of revolution, not with the actuality. All of us have seen the “movie-spectacular,” with the dastardly rebel demanding that the lovely queen yield to his awful desires, else he will permit the revolution to sweep on; if she does yield, he promises to call the whole thing off. Such films, of course, always begin with the fine-print reminder that any similarity between what the spectators are about to see

and real life is purely coincidental; certainly, as a dramatization of the revolutionary process, this conventional Hollywood version has nothing to do with reality.

If the widest popular participation, at its most intense level, be basic to the meaning of democracy—and I think it is—then the whole revolutionary process and culmination, far from being contrary to democracy, represents its quintessence. And the more fundamental the nature of the revolutionary process, the more democratic it will be, the more irrelevant will be conspiracy, the more indigenous will be its roots, and the more necessary will be the deepest involvement of the vast majority of the population.

It is counter-revolution which is anti-democratic and therefore conspiratorial in character. Counter-revolution, hostile to the interests of the vast majority and contemptuous of the majority, elitist and exploitative, finds it necessary to operate by stealth, through deliberate deception, and with dependence upon the precipitation of violence. This is why Aaron Burr, seeking to sever the western half of the United States from the new Republic and to establish his own empire, operated with but a few confederates, accumulated weapons, and based himself upon twenty pieces of silver from French and Spanish Pilates. This is why Franco, a General of the Army of the Spanish Republic, representing extremely reactionary and feudalistic elements in Spain, selling out to German and Italian fascism, secretly plotted the forcible overthrow of the legally elected and popular government, and based himself upon mercenary, non-Spanish troops for the accomplishment of the purpose.

This is why the overthrowals of the Mossadegh government in Iran and the Arbenz government in Guatemala—whose programs represented popular aspirations, as their existence reflected popular support—were engineered by the Central Intelligence Agency of the United States. These are examples of truly unpopular and therefore secretive and conspiratorial—not to speak of the question of illegality and violation of sovereignty—governmental changes, reflecting not revolution, but counter-revolution.

The ruling-class charge of "conspiratorial" hurled against revolutionary movements has the obvious inspiration of serving to condemn such movements and as a pretext for efforts to illegalize

them and to persecute their advocates and adherents. The ruling-class charge of anti-democratic heard today in this country against revolutionary efforts, reflects the demagogic use of the deep democratic traditions of our land and the persistent hold those traditions have upon many millions of our compatriots.

The basic source, however, of the conventional ruling-class charge of conspiracy and sedition—usually spiced with the additional libel of alien-inspiration—stems from the classes' rationalization for their own domination. That is, exploitative ruling classes always insist that the orders they dominate are idyllic and that nothing but devotion and contentment characterize the people fortunate enough to live under their rule.

Hence, where significant revolutionary movements do appear, they must reflect not fundamental contradictions and antagonisms and injustices within the system, but rather the nefarious machinations of distempered individuals or of agents of a hostile foreign power. That is, the source of the unrest may be anywhere—in the blandishments of the devil, the influence of the notorious Declaration of Independence or of the Communist Manifesto, or the Paris Commune, or the Moscow Kremlin, or the Garrisonian sheet published in Boston, called *The Liberator*, or the anti-American schemings of Queen Victoria, or the Protocols of Zion, or the Bavarian Illuminati—but it cannot be within the social order challenged by the unrest. For, obviously, if it were there, this would question the basic conceptions of their own order so far as those dominating it are concerned, and would tend to justify the efforts at change.

This kind of thinking, furthermore, is natural for exploitative ruling classes since their inherent elitism makes them contemptuous of the masses of people. They, therefore, tend to see them as sodden robots, or unruly children, or slumbering beasts, and feel that they may be goaded into fits of temper, or duped into displays of savagery, but that no other sources for their own expressions of their own real needs and aims are possible. In any case, with the paternalism characteristic of elitism, exploitative ruling classes tend to be certain that they know what is best for their own "people."

A stark illustration of these tendencies and attitudes, inten-

sified by that special form of elitism known as racism, appeared in the response of American slaveowners to evidences of unrest among the Negro slaves. Whenever such evidences appeared, the slaveowners invariably insisted that they were due to outside agitators, Northern fanatics or knaves, who had stirred up their slaves, for their own malicious or misguided reasons. The Abolitionists denied the charge and insisted that the source of the unrest of the slaves lay in slavery. They offered a dramatic proof of this idea, when they assured the slaveowners that they knew a perfect and permanent cure for slave uprisings, and one that if not adopted would simultaneously guarantee the continuance of such uprisings.

If you would eliminate slave revolts, said the Abolitionists, eliminate slavery. If the slaves are emancipated on Monday, the following Tuesday would mark the beginning of a condition which would be permanently free of slave risings; but if the slaves are not freed, then, no matter what precautions are taken uprisings would occur.

This point was hammered home, in the days of the American Revolution—which, one might think, would be lesson enough—by Benjamin Franklin in the course of a debate over taxation policy held in the Continental Congress. At this time, a delegate from Maryland remarked that he could see no reason for making any distinction among various forms of property when it came to taxing them, and that therefore he thought the principle of taxing slaves should differ in no way from the principle of taxing sheep. Franklin, getting the eye of the chairman, asked the Marylander if he would permit an interruption for the purpose of a question, which, Mr. Franklin believed, might serve to illuminate the point being made. The Marylander granted the courtesy and Franklin propounded one of the most pregnant questions ever conceived. Noting that the Marylander could see no difference between such property as slaves and sheep, Benjamin Franklin then asked: "Can the delegate from Maryland point to a single insurrection of sheep?"

If human beings did nothing but masticate, defecate, fornicate and, when dead, dessicate, there would be, of course, no insurrection of slaves, anymore than there have been insurrections of sheep. It is, rather, the capacity to think, yearn, dream, plan, compare; to

feel discontent and to project its elimination; it is the glorious insistence that life may be better than it is for ourselves and our children which is the essential content of the human in the species human being. It is this which is the overall dynamic of history, and it is the contradictions and antagonisms within hitherto existing exploitative societies that have, fundamentally, accounted for the revolutionary process which, despite everything, has existed, developed and triumphed in the past.

The concept of democracy is born of revolution; and not least, in this connection, is our own American Revolution. In the 18th century the American word, "Congress," reverberated through the palaces of the world with the same impact with which, in the 20th century, the Russian word, "Soviet," reverberated through the mansions of the world; and the word, "citizen," connoted very much the same partisanship on the side of the sovereignty of the people, that the word, "comrade," does today.

Today, when the fullest implementation, in every aspect, of popular sovereignty is on the historical agenda, the democratic and anti-conspiratorial character of the revolutionary process is especially clear. This is why Engels, back in March, 1895, in an introduction to Marx's *The Class Struggles in France*, was able to write:

The time of surprise attacks, of revolutions carried through by small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses, is past. Where it is a question of a complete transformation of the social organization, the masses themselves must also be in it, must themselves already have grasped what is at stake, what they are going in for with body and soul. The history of the past fifty years has taught us that.

And, I think, the history of the years since Engels penned those words has confirmed further their truth. To conclude: the revolutionary process was the most democratic of all historical developments in the past, and in the present era—the era of the transition from capitalism to socialism—the revolutionary process remains thoroughly democratic, in inspiration, in organization, in purpose, and in mode of accomplishment.

## V: On the "High Cost" of Revolution

It is widely held that while revolution may possibly bring about certain worthwhile changes, it accomplishes this at a cost in human suffering that is much too high. One hears, today, for example, statements to the effect that while Revolutions in Russia and in China may have resulted in certain undeniable advances, they have come at a cost in travail that was excessive.

Concerning this, I would like to offer five points for consideration.

First, normally those who lament the allegedly excessive cost of revolution tend to accept as valid tally-sheets of the cost, the verdicts and the reports emanating from foes of the revolution. Hence, after the generation of mis-reporting about the Russian Revolution, one found a sense of astonishment among the American people when the U.S.R.R. stood up against the assembled might of all Europe, led by Hitler, stopped it and—with not very much help—finally hurled it back from whence it had come and beyond. Again, since 1957 and the first Sputnik, a general feeling of amazement has swept large sections of the American populace in the face of great technical achievements which manifestly reflected high levels of educational scientific, engineering and industrial development in the Soviet Union, and which contradicted the picture they had been given of a backward, impoverished, cowed and ignorant population.

Now, individuals like Mrs. Roosevelt and Adlai Stevenson, returning from the U.S.S.R. and alarmed at the abysmal ignorance and misinformation concerning it that predominate in our own country, are appealing for some effort at realistic reportage. At the same time as the latter made this appeal, Mr. Stevenson hinted at something of the source of the misrepresentation when he remarked that it was difficult to tell the truth about the astonishing accomplishments in education, science, and production in the U.S.S.R. without appearing to be a partisan of Socialism!

When it comes to the Chinese Revolution, the Eisenhower Administration's absurd insistence that the Chinese mainland only exists when it chooses to "recognize" it, has produced the nearly

total absence of any first-hand American reportage, and to this day the *New York Times* has not even learned that the correct spelling of the capital of the Chinese People's Republic is Peking, and not Peiping!

In the face of the notoriously biased and fallacious reportage concerning revolutions, those who claim that the cost of whatever progress they may bring is too high, do depend for their estimate of that cost upon such reportage. This manifestly will not do.

Secondly, those who lament the high cost of revolution tend, at least by implication, to assume that the cost of arriving at the status quo was low. We would urge that this needs reconsideration. There are in the world today two major kinds of revolutionary movements—often inter-related—for national liberation, and for Socialism. Both are aimed at the termination of imperialism; *has the cost of producing this imperialism ever been counted up?*

Are not the African slave-trade and Negro slavery associated with the beginnings and development of capitalism? Are not the genocidal policies carried out against the original inhabitants of the Americas and of Asia similarly associated? Is not the centuries' long torment of India connected with the rise of British capitalism and imperialism? Have not preparation for war and the making of war been the most lucrative businesses for capitalism for several hundreds of years? Is it not a fact that the historical developments I have just mentioned cost the lives of hundreds of millions of people through some four centuries; and might one not easily add many others—equally organic to the rise of capitalism and the truth about colonialism and imperialism—which have taken the lives of and caused fearful suffering to, additional millions upon millions of men, women, and children?

Thirdly, lamentations about the high cost of revolution assume, do they not, that the status quo exists at a low cost in terms of human suffering? But is this true? We have referred specifically to the Russian and Chinese Revolutions, since these are most often cited as the "horrible examples." Very well, what of the status quo that existed and was undone by the revolutions there? Were not Old China and Old Russia torn repeatedly by wars fought for sordid ends, and taking millions of lives? Were not Old China and Old Russia marked by mass illiteracy, by terrible epidemics,

by repeated famines, by fiercely high death rates? Were not the women in Old China and Old Russia hardly more than slaves? Was not the persecution of minorities on national and religious grounds institutionalized in both? Was not prostitution rampant in those "good old days?" Were not those countries prime examples of terrible backwardness and impoverishment? Are these realities of the former status quo sufficiently borne in mind by those who "regret" the "high cost" of Revolution?

Fourthly, is there not implicit in the regret over the cost of revolution the idea that if there should be any changes needed in the status quo—when such a need is admitted—that these can be brought about gradually, moderately, and without fuss, as it were? But where one is dealing with really significant changes, policies of reformism, of gradualism, of so-called moderation, are in reality policies of acquiescence in the prevailing conditions. Have significant changes in the past come through policies of moderation? Is that how, for example, the United States came into being? Is that how feudal privileges were eliminated anywhere in the world? Is that how chattel slavery was wiped out in our own country?

There were advocates of moderation in the United States on this question of Negro slavery—of course, they were not among the slaves, themselves. To cry "moderation" is not difficult when it is the other fellow who is being crucified; especially if the other man's suffering represents enormous vested interests. But this tactic then would not do because it showed a failure to comprehend the nature of slavery—the fact that it represented four billion dollars; the fact that the class owning those slaves wielded on that basis enormous political power; and the fact that the way to end slavery was to end it, not "moderate" it. Had the moderationists prevailed, we would still be debating the question of slavery in this country, and wondering whether or not it would be wise to pass a gradual emancipationist act in the year 2612, to take effect, a little at a time, perhaps, in 3200 A.D. And while the rest of us were "patient" and talked and pondered and wondered, the Negro millions would be asked, of course, to go on enduring slavery.

Moreover, this moderationist approach views the status quo as static; but a social organism, being an organism, will be every-



thing except static. It will be in process of change, and this may be progressive or retrogressive. One thing society is not, and that is static. This tactic of moderation ignores the tendency of those who are dominant to seek to gain more and more through their domination and to do everything they can to make more and more secure their domination. The fact of the matter is that a policy of moderation will not adequately serve even to keep an exploitative social order from retrogressing, let alone help in making any kind of really substantial or significant progress.

Further, the moderationist, or reformist, approach, fundamentally accepting the status quo, tends to shy away from any kind of mass struggle, any kind of significant widespread human involvement in the efforts to produce social change. But the past demonstrates, I think, that nothing is *given* by dominating classes, and this applies not only to basic advances such as the elimination of slavery; it applies also to less fundamental alterations, such as the right to form trade unions, or the enfranchisement of women, or obtaining unemployment insurance. These accomplishments were the result of hard, prolonged, mass struggle; and to retain them and make them meaningful, after they have been obtained, also requires constant vigilance and mass effort.

We are not here arguing against reforms, but rather against reformism; the former are way-stations on the road to basic social advance; the latter is the tactic of avoiding basic social advance. It is, of course, fundamentally, on the basis of day-to-day efforts, on real questions having immediate significance for large numbers of people, that major social struggles occur. Accomplishments made in the course of such struggles prepare the way for other and often more substantial gains in the future. Further, the process of achieving such gains is a process of organization and education—in their own strength and in the nature of the resisting force—of the people participating, and in that sense also constitutes indispensable elements making possible the achievement of basic social advance.

Fifthly, while we argue that those who hold that the cost of revolution is too high are profoundly wrong, we do not mean to indicate by this a belief that revolution is without cost. Certainly, it is not, and so drastic, prolonged and sweeping a development as is involved in the process of revolution will be costly. In it

there will be human tragedy and suffering, some of it unavoidable, and some of it the result of failing and error and evil.

Great things are not come by lightly and are not achieved without cost. But revolutionary movements represent profound human and social needs and forces; indeed, needs and forces that are irresistible. Fundamental to these needs and forces are the intolerable conditions emanating from the status quo, producing that mass awakening and activity without which revolution could not even begin, let alone succeed. Viewed historically and analytically, viewed realistically, and viewed in terms of the supreme end of existence—the ennoblement of human life—the record shows, I think, that the revolutionary process does not come at too high a cost, but rather as a breath of fresh air and as a force moving forward decisively the whole human race.

## **VI: Non-Socialist and Socialist Revolutions (1)**

What differences are there between non-socialist and socialist revolutions?

In the great revolutionary sweeps that have hitherto marked human history—prior to the appearance of Socialism—with slavery being replaced by serf-bound landholding, and this by wage labor, the private possession of capital, and the intense development of industry in Western Europe and in the northern half of the New World, there persisted one common characteristic: in all of these systems, slave, feudal, capitalist, the means of production remained the private property of a small minority. In other forms of revolutionary change, especially those associated with colonial and national liberation movements—for instance, the founding of the United States, or of the nations in Latin-America—while very significant political, economic, and social changes appeared, again one thing endured, namely, the private ownership of the means of production.

It is exactly this element, which had resisted change in all preceding revolutions, whose transformation constitutes the distinguishing characteristic of the Socialist revolution. In this respect, the qualitative change encompassed in the move from capitalism

to Socialism is more profound than that in the move from feudalism to capitalism, or from slavery to feudalism, in that it puts an end to exploitation altogether.

It is a fact, then, that despite all the great changes that have marked pre-Socialist history for thousands of years, there remained the constancy of the private possession of the means of production. The ultimate, decisive repository of economic and state power lay in the hands of the possessing class (or classes); and the basic function of government was to secure this property relationship. Constant, too, remained the identification of ability with wealth, of propriety with property, of the masterly with the master, of being rich with being good; and, the opposite of all this also constantly prevailed—the poor were the incapable, the poor were no good (the very word, “poor” having two meanings); and vulgarity was the companion of poverty.

This meant, too, that in all previous revolutions, some form of accommodation was possible and was practiced between the propertied class coming into full power and the propertied class being removed from full power. That is, for example, with the elimination of slavery, the slaveowners normally—as in the United States—remained as a class of significant landowners, with all the power and prestige inhering in such a class. In such revolutions, compromise was the rule, once the shift in power had been consolidated, and coalitions developed, with the erstwhile rulers now in a subordinate, but important and respected position, and united in fundamental opposition to the non-propertied.

Further, in the accomplishments of non-Socialist revolutions, the developing system which is to replace the outmoded one has already come into being: the successful revolution indicates the *maturing* of the new system to the point where it can eliminate the old class from its dominant position. That is, the system of capitalism exists prior to the overthrow of feudalism, and grows to the point where it can overthrow feudalism. Here it is not simply that the new revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, has come into being; its existence means that *capitalism* is already in existence and is functioning.

When capitalism grows to the point where it finds the restrictions of feudalism unbearable and where it possesses the political

and organizational strength to force a change, it does so. But that change, and the coming into political dominance of the bourgeoisie reflects an already existing social system, namely, capitalism. And now, with victory, the bourgeoisie uses the state to help advance its own interests—to help its growth and development. In this, normally, it permits the existence of feudal remnants and welcomes the persistence of aristocratic families; later, as capitalism becomes worldwide, and especially as it approaches obsolescence and faces the challenge of Socialism, it actively sustains feudal elements outside its own borders, and attempts a revival of certain feudal values within its own borders.

In all these respects, the Socialist revolution is different. The Socialist revolution, in the sense of the elimination from state power of the bourgeoisie and the gaining of state power by the working class and its allies, is accomplished prior to the coming into being of Socialism. The bourgeoisie takes state power from the feudal lords and then uses the state to further develop an already existing capitalism; the productive masses take state power from the bourgeoisie and then use state power in order to *begin* the establishment of Socialism.

Of course, in both the capitalist and Socialist revolution, the revolutionary classes have come into being prior to the accomplishment of the revolution and lead in its achievement; but in the Socialist revolution, the working masses, having achieved state power, must start from scratch in remaking the whole character and nature of the social order. The significance of this distinction is intensified when one remembers that the Socialist revolution seeks a more profound transformation than any revolution that preceded it. It seeks, for the first time, to eliminate the private ownership of the means of production; it seeks for the first time to produce a social order wherein acquisitiveness and personal aggrandizement are not the dynamic components of the economy, but are rather hostile to the economy.

Furthermore, not only must more be done, but it must be done by a class which has not had the opportunity of acquiring the skills and knowledge of rule and of direction. In the move from feudalism to capitalism and in the victory of capitalism, the bourgeoisie already had the experience of functioning as economic and political

directors and administrators; that is, the capitalists, when finally taking over state power, had had experience in participating in state power. They had developed cultural, technical and educational skills of a high order and so had the qualified leadership, in the necessary numbers, to serve as diplomats, economists, directors, leaders, teachers, statesmen of the new social system.

But the working masses, in gaining state power and seeking to start the remaking of the social order, in a thoroughly basic manner, must do so without having had positions of leadership in the operative levels of the preceding social order. And since the change now being sought is so fundamental, cooperation with the ousted class is not possible.

It is the central nature of state power and the enormous tasks that the state must undertake in producing the Socialist revolution that make the concept of the transformation of the nature of the state so basic a component of the political theory of Marxism. It is the extreme difficulty involved in developing a loyal and skilled administrative group, under these unprecedented conditions and for these altogether new aims, which accounts for the emphasis in Marxism upon the security of the revolutionary state.

Certainly, the basic distinction between Socialist and non-Socialist revolution, is that imbedded in the impact each has upon the private ownership of the means of production. One eliminates such ownership; the other modifies the kind of such ownership, but does not alter the basic fact that some form of private ownership of the means of production persists and that this ultimately controls the character of the other features of the social order.

## **VII: Non-Socialist and Socialist Revolutions (2)**

Socialist revolution, unlike its predecessors, being based upon what its adherents consider to be a scientific world outlook—dialectical materialism—signifies a higher level of consciousness in the struggle to achieve it, and a policy of consistent planning in the effort to safeguard it and to build a new society.

Socialist revolution conceives of itself as instituting a system wherein dynamics, change—being an immutable law—continues to

function. Unlike preceding revolutions, this one does not view itself as being the last. The Socialist revolution does lay the groundwork for the appearance of a social order without class antagonisms, the resolving of which, hitherto, comprised the force propelling change; but replacing this, under Socialism, appear the perpetual drive towards the fuller and fuller conquest of nature, and also the process of criticism and self-criticism. These forces will, with sufficient technological advances, make certain the development of Communism out of Socialism, with the former differing from the latter in the assurance of abundance for all, in the presence of a general equalitarianism, and in the absence of institutionalized restraints having the character of the present State.

The Socialist revolution brings into being, for the first time, a society opposed in principle to all concepts of elitism, whether this elitism be based upon race or religion or occupation. The principle of service conquering that of aggrandizement, this denial of elitism will apply also to varying endowments of talent or capacity, in which, if there be real superiority, it will require enhanced contributions and service, rather than gain enhanced reward and power. Furthermore, in a society marked by an absence of class antagonism and the outlawry of exploitation, the whole concept of leadership, which classically has involved beguiling and deceiving, will alter to connote especially effective participation and genuine guidance.

The opposition to elitism shows itself in Socialism most dramatically in principled opposition to racism, which is outlawed in all Socialist societies. This carries with it not only laws and regulations for the society itself; it also helps determine the attitude of Socialist societies to the whole system of colonialism, based as that system is, ideologically, upon racism.

Colonialism and racism—attributes of capitalism—mean in fact a condition of parasitism in which the imperial powers provide their home populations with relatively higher standards of living and (often) greater political rights, on the basis, in large part, of the deprivations suffered by the peoples held in colonial bondage. A notorious manifestation of this is the policy pursued by imperialism of inhibiting the development of industry in the colonial world, thus forcing the colonial peoples to be suppliers of raw

materials and purchasers of finished products, and, in both cases, at prices set by the dominating power.

Socialism not only makes possible a much greater rate of growth in industrial production at home, without the intermittent crises that are organic to exploitative social orders; it also has no reason to inhibit the development of industrial production in other areas of the world. On the contrary, Socialist countries are interested in the swiftest development of economic potential throughout the world, for this can redound only to their own benefit.

Hence, in the ultimate test of social systems—their productive capacity—Socialism is superior to capitalism. For while capitalism, in its final stage, in the present century, is marked by a notable decline in its rate of productive growth in the major countries, it is also characterized by a tendency to restrict the productive capacities of the so-called “backward” parts of the world. For, in large part, the “progressive” features of the economy of the imperialist powers rested exactly upon the “backward” nature of the rest of the world.

The Socialist revolution has torn from the grasp of imperialism large areas of this “backward” world and has, in a matter of a few decades (in the case of China, in a matter of a few years) transformed them into remarkably productive areas, challenging the “advanced” capitalist nations for productive supremacy. Simultaneously, it pursues a policy of actively assisting other areas—those not yet Socialist—in their effort to advance themselves industrially.

Furthermore, since under Socialism the contradiction between the socialized means of production and the individualized mode of appropriation, characteristic of capitalism, has been eliminated, it is a system which is unmarked by periodic economic crisis, and above all, by the horror of mass unemployment. Again, on the basis of the elimination of this central economic contradiction and of the profit motive that goes with it, Socialism is a system whose basic motivations are revolted by preparations for or the waging of war. While increasingly, the economies of the advanced capitalist countries are maintained on the basis of enormous expenditures for weapons of destruction—and while such expenditure represents the most lucrative business there is—in Socialism these expenditures

represent pure waste. Far from the economic system of Socialism depending upon war-making expenditures, they are fearful burdens to it.

Hence, again, the Socialist system is characterized—and this for the first time in history, again marking a fundamental distinction between the Socialist revolution and all revolutions that preceded it—by implacable and principled hostility to the whole phenomenon of war. As the truly cataclysmic nature of modern war is brought home more and more vividly to more and more millions of the human race, the fact that one system, capitalism, needs it and breeds it, while the other, Socialism, detests it and struggles against it, enhances the revulsion against the former and the attraction of the latter.

The opposition to elitism of Socialism also means that for the first time, this system actively seeks to universalize human knowledge and human culture. It insists that the great scientific and artistic treasures of mankind can be the possession of all mankind, and not of just a handful among the rich and the intelligentsia. From this surely will come in time not only the universal possession of these treasures, but also the creation of additional masterpieces on a scale never before approached by any social order.

On the basis of such mastery, and on the basis of a system of abundance and peace, the real and functioning sovereignty of the people will be possible; hence, with the Socialist revolution the fullest implementation of the concept of government by, for, and of the people is made possible.

Note that in all of the above, none of the changes and advances come automatically or come at once. All must be actively sought after, in a planned and organized manner, and all will take not only much effort but also much time to achieve. Impeding will be not only non-Socialist societies, but also the vestiges of the past within the Socialist societies, some of these vestiges going back thousands of years, to pre-capitalist and pre-feudal times, such as the attitude of male supremacy, to cite but one example.

The difficulties will be great, as befits the greatness of the prize to be won. But the elimination of the private possession of the means of production, and the commitment to the building of a socialist society, with the working class itself leading the construc-



tion of an anti-exploitative order, constitute the prerequisite for the development of the truly human epoch of history.

At any rate, what James Russell Lowell said at Harvard in 1865, has served as our inspiration:

*Let liars fear, let cowards shrink,  
Let traitors turn away;  
Whatever we have dared to think  
That dare we also say.*

And as for revolution, in particular, the four lines from the poem entitled "Revolution," by the Jewish poet, Joseph Bovshover, will do for the conclusion:

*I come because tyrants have put up their thrones in place  
of the nations;  
I come because rulers are foddering peace with their war  
preparations;  
I come because ties that bound people together are now  
disconnected;  
I come because fools think that progress will stay in the  
bounds they erected.*

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