Editorial

Advanced Theory for the 1980s

by Paul Costello

Five years ago, when the *Theoretical Review* was launched, our first editorial pointed to the urgent need for a coming together of Marxist theoretical workers and political activists. Decrying the relative isolation of these two groups from each other in the United States, we insisted that neither one could make consistent progress in its own field without the participation and assistance of the other. If anything, our concern then is even more urgent now, given the current state of the Marxist-Leninist left. On the one hand, political activists are in disarray: the pro-Chinese left has collapsed as have the OC-IC and other remnants of anti-revisionist Leninism, except for *Line of March* which now seems to be competing with the CPUSA for the Moscow franchise. Marxist intellectuals in the meantime have either concerned themselves with ever more academic pursuits or else given themselves uncritically to traditional Social Democratic reformism. Not that the picture is entirely bleak. As a result of the activity of this second group, we are told that Marxist theory is enjoying a certain degree of popularity among broader intellectual circles. Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff, in their recent *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses* (published by the eminently respectable firm, McGraw-Hill) proclaims that "a Marxist Cultural Revolution is taking place today in American Universities."[1] What we neglect to mention in this self-congratulation is the difference between Marxism in academia and academic Marxism. This is because their interest, if not their own work, is almost entirely inscribed within the limits of the latter. Regardless of its merits and the struggle it is waging for academic freedom in the Universities (which is deserving of our support), academic Marxism is inherently incapable of maintaining an organic connection with the political struggles of American working people or providing political activists with the theory they need. For that very different kind of Marxism we will always have to seek elsewhere.

But as regular readers of this journal are well aware, Marxist theory here and abroad is suffering from more serious maladies than academic Marxism. True, one can point to the volume of creative works being published by New Left Books in England and Monthly Review in this country, or the energetic debates unfolding in journals such as *Economy and Society, New Left Review, URPE* and *Marxism Today,* to only mention English language publications. Yet despite its apparent intellectual vigor and its current popularity, Marxist theory is currently faced with very serious problems which must be located at the very heart of its critical success. In the last few years, for example, we have seen a number of very lively debates on the labor theory of value, the nature of the State and politics, the role of the "middle strata," the definition of social classes, the question of ideology, and on the class character of the USSR. Significantly, none of these debates have been satisfactorily resolved at the theoretical or political levels, but have instead revealed what Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst characterize as "fundamental ambiguities and difficulties in the basic concepts of Marxist theory." For Hindess and Hirst, "these debates, in their very incoherence and inconclusiveness, signal the failure of Marxist theory" to analyse Modern Western capitalism and socialism and translate this understanding into effective political practice.[2]

While Marxist theory in general is experiencing the effects of this crisis, the US political left milieu out of which the *Theoretical Review* arose is in no less difficulty. As noted above, it used to be possible, three or four years ago, to speak of two movements in American communism—an official one, dominated by the Communist Party, USA, and a left-wing alternative made up of a variety of various left and ultra-left groupings. Today, the vast majority of these left parties and pre-party formations have declined significantly or entirely disappeared. Why did these sects almost universally fail, not only in this country, but internationally as well? A variety of factors contributed to their demise, most of which are beyond the scope of this editorial. *Politically,* however, several key problems merit our immediate attention.

Perhaps the most important factor was that these groups were never able to theorize a strategy and tactics necessary to create the political and ideological conditions for socialist transformation in the specific conditions of modern capitalism. In this country we are referring to the inability to theorize the specific conditions of *advanced capitalism* as they uniquely developed in the United States, the most powerful capitalist country on earth. Because of this failure of the left, and in place of this analysis, the Marxist-Leninist movement developed (or rather adopted) what has been

characterized as a "privilege of the program" mentality. For those who operate within the confines of this system, a sect, no matter how small, need only come up with the "correct program" to insure its "ultimate success." That is, a line or program, if correct, gives the organization which has it strategic advantages which render obsolete all others on the left. Having discovered the correct program beforehand, that group can then take its line to the masses, counterpose the program to "bourgeois ideology," and find the masses ultimately recognizing it as their own and therefore taking it up. The group will then gain hegemony and seize state power. So goes the scenario.

Needless to say, continuing isolation and defeat are built into this mentality from the very beginning. Political practice, if it is to be successful, is not a given, but the product of a convergence of factors. First, it requires a theoretically developed understanding of the social dynamic of a particular country, and the structural limits within which the galaxy of social forces at any particular moment are obliged to operate. Secondly, political interventions must be based on individuals, groups, organizations and practices which either are presently existing or capable of construction and which have the possibility of altering the existing balance of political forces. Finally, political practice requires acting in the arena where this balance is set and possessing or creating the means to implement the politics which will have a desired effect in that arena.

All of this necessitates a broad and sustained theoretical effort closely linked with an open and consciously self-critical on-going political practice. To substitute for either or both the fetish of an apriori "correct program" is a one-way ticket to sectarian collapse. Unfortunately, neither the communist movement nor democratic socialism in the United States have been able to develop this necessary theoretical/political practice on a firm foundation. As for ourselves, while we at the *Theoretical Review* have attempted to critique the *theoretical* basis of the present crisis of Marxism, we have yet to systematically propose a developed *political* alternative to Stalinian "socialism" on the one hand and classical Social Democratic reformism on the other.

We agree with Hindess and Hirst that the ambiguities and difficulties in the basic concepts of Marxist theory are not the "errors of third rate epigones but symptoms of problems in the concepts of *Capital* and other basic works of Marxist theory" itself.[3] Our concern is that these problems and their political ramifications not be ignored, or wished away, but directly confronted in order to enrich and develop the revolutionary and liberating side of scientific socialism. To this end we have prepared this special issue of the *Theoretical Review* which is dedicated to examining some of the theoreticians who have made important contributions to openly identifying and overcoming the crisis of Marxism by critically examining fundamental areas of difficulty and dispute within our theoretical system and providing us with a basis from which to go forward. Most significant of these, in our opinion, are the contributions of Louis Althusser and Antonio Gramsci.

These two seminal thinkers, when their works are taken together, contribute vital ammunition to the struggle for a unification of a revitalized Marxist theory and a genuine revolutionary socialist practice. The implications of this union are far-reaching in a number of respects.

First, both Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* and Althusser's writings should be read in light of the Leninist tradition in which both authors were operating. That is to say, both incorporate Lenin's fundamental contributions to the struggle against the Marxism of the Second International: the return of politics to its central place in Marxist thought (the struggle against economism); and the priority given to revolutionary political practice (the struggle against reformism). At the same time, however, each in his own way represents a continuation, translation and further development of Lenin's contributions in different historical conditions and with different political conclusions.

Secondly, Gramsci and Althusser's work are profoundly complementary and should be read in reference to each other. Both deepen the critique of economism, rethink the Marxist theory of politics and the State, revivify Marxist philosophy and shed new light on the Marxist theory of ideology.

Thirdly, both are premised on the fact that the conditions of advanced capitalism require a fundamentally new and revolutionary approach to socialist transition and socialist revolution. The writings of these two theoreticians provide many of the necessary ingredients from which a revolutionary strategy for the United States will have to draw its inspiration. This is an immediate political question for our movement and their work has direct meaning for the issues before us.

Finally, both Althusser amd Gramsci provide us with a new relationship between theory and politics, one of genuine unity which enables us to avoid the two dead-end alternatives which have traditionally faced Marxism-Leninism in the advanced capitalist countries: on the one hand the Stalinian deviation, which treats theory as an apology after the fact for political practice, and "Western Marxism for which theory, more particularly philosophy, is the "critical truth" of politics.

Obviously we cannot demonstrate the correctness of all these assertions in this short introduction. That we leave for the articles in this issue, the works of the theoreticians themselves and those of their most prominent followers. It would be foolish to assert that there is some kind of automatic coincidence between the views of Gramsci and Althusser or those of their respective supporters. On the contrary, the revolutionary convergence of their individual contributions can only come from a sustained symptomatic reading of their various texts and the sustained testing of these results of this effort in theoretical and political practice. The *Theoretical Review* is eager to facilitate this process, particularly now in the realm of developing a politically viable socialist strategy. We encourage those readers who share our enthusiasm for this project and for the goal of uniting ever more closely Marxist theoretical workers and political activities to contribute to this end and to support our work.