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KARL MARX: Foreign Philosopher

.....by **Leo F. Goodstadt**.....

The Chinese Communist Party insists that practice is the sole criterion of truth. On this test, the hundred years since the death of Karl Marx have not produced persuasive evidence that his vision of the future is the fastest road to prosperity. Whatever other virtues may be argued in favour of states ruled by political parties dedicated to Marxism, their economies have failed to flourish with anything like the success which the non-communist industrialised nations have enjoyed. The brand of politics which proclaims Karl Marx as its founding father consistently failed to generate solutions to the problems of poverty.

The setbacks and disappointments which have followed attempts to recreate societies in a Marxist mould are not necessarily to be taken as an irrefutable demonstration of the superior worth of capitalism. For a considerable number of intellectuals, in both the Western and the Asian democracies, capitalism is only too obviously tainted with gross defects and remains hard to justify on moral grounds. Over the years, these intellectuals have looked first to the Soviet Union and then to China for proof that an alternative to capitalism can be found which will achieve economic growth without the loss of human values.¹ But the record shows that the economies managed by communist parties have performed worse than capitalist states; while the flow of emigrants has been

from communist party rule to those countries which Marxists denounce as mere "bourgeois democracies".

Catholic intellectuals have also displayed a similar desire to find an alternative to capitalism, which has led many of them along Marxist paths. An impressive effort was made over fifty years ago to demonstrate how much Karl Marx had borrowed from Catholic medieval philosophers, although this theory is open to serious objections.² What cannot be denied is that the Catholic Church historically has insisted that men's economic relations must not be left to the exclusive regulation of market forces and has consistently maintained that the profit motive must not reign supreme. Indeed, prewar readers of A. Fanfani's Catholicism, Protestantism and Capitalism could easily have imagined that the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages had pioneered state intervention in economic affairs along lines which modern Marxists were emulating. The legacy of medieval thought which, until Vatican Council II, remained an integral part of clerical education helps to explain the attractions of Marxism in the Catholic countries in marked contrast to the Protestant sphere of influence. The duties of the state to interfere to prevent the exploitation in commerce and employment of poorer human beings by the more affluent is part of Catholic culture even if more honoured in the breach than the observance. To this extent, many Catholic revolutionaries believe they have much in common with Karl Marx's latter-day disciples.



"The profit motive must not reign supreme".

Nevertheless, it is hard to resist disillusionment. Where communist parties rule, their constituents are poorer than they need be and deprived of a great part of their personal liberty. Possibly these countries are better off than under their previous rulers. Perhaps the sacrifices of their citizens are justified by the splendid futures which they are building. The fact remains that East Germany is a bleaker place to dwell than West Germany; the Soviet Union is not plagued, as the United States is, by millions of illegal immigrants anxious to enjoy the affluence of an advanced technological society; and China, alas, is not as efficient as Japan.

Yet Karl Marx is not just a preacher of revolutionary politics. He has had an impact on the way in which the world sees itself. In simplistic terms, Karl Marx has made thoughtful people self-conscious and frequently guilty about their own motives. His theory of human behaviour has had the same sort of impact on the search for objective analysis of history and politics as Freudian psychology has had on personal relations: is X reflecting the selfish attitudes of his privileged class background; is Y supporting the expansionist ambitions of his imperialist country; their apparently unselfish motives concealing these subconscious but unhealthy trends. While most of us are sufficiently robust to see such doubts in a proper perspective, these attitudes are convenient when analysing the conduct of nations and of their political and business leaders.

Indeed, this awareness of hidden tendencies to profit through the exploitation of others and the desire to identify the real interests which motivate different social groups are useful tools in grasping the realities of the world in which we live. Most Catholics will refuse to accept the communist parties' standard practice of using class analysis and class labels as a sort of Marxist original sin which predisposes those so marked towards evil. At the same time, Marxist techniques are a useful check on a temptation to see the individual as isolated from his origins and his relationships in society. However, Karl Marx's contribution in this area must not be interpreted as an ethical discovery for, as the work of Morishima suggests,³ in the last resort Marxism can be reduced to a series of equations - whose contribution to knowledge depends very much on how we use them.

What about the Chinese context? The most important event of the year which marks the centenary of Karl Marx's death was the decision to overhaul the entire Communist Party and make the Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping the basic ideological textbook for his massive rectification campaign. Not that China overlooked the centenary. A spate of articles

appeared on the value of Karl Marx in shaping the revolutionary thought of China and on the role of Marxism in modern China. But the anniversary did not lead to that public re-evaluation of Marxism in the Chinese context which might have been expected.

For very practical reasons, the thinking of Deng Xiaoping about the nation, its present problems and future prospects, is more important for the Communist Party to propagate today than Karl Marx. The hope of the Communist Party in 1983 was that Deng Xiaoping would meet the need for new ideological attitudes to ease the problems which have emerged since the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Furthermore, Deng's comments have a relevance and novelty which could help to re-establish the Communist Party's ideological credibility among the groups which have become disillusioned by their experiences during the Maoist era.

A number of Chinese writers have discussed in frank terms the way in which the dominant position of the Communist Party's ideology has been eroded by the Cultural Revolution, by the attractions of foreign ideas and life styles and by the Communist Party's own errors. Official commentators, such as Ru Xin, indicate quite strongly that Marxism has to battle hard to establish its right to rule in today's China (Renmin Ribao 20 July 1983). In other words, the Chinese are no longer as idealistic about Karl Marx and the theories which he fostered as they were in the pre-1969 years. The Anti-Rightist Campaign, the Great Leap Forward, the Four Cleans, the Cultural Revolution, the Anti-Lin Anti-Confucius Campaign have not been conducive to unquestioning faith in Marxism or those who quote Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin.

Some Chinese cynics claim that most quotations from Karl Marx which appear in official articles could be removed with no alteration in their content or significance. Up to 1976, such a criticism could not have been sustained since ideological minutiae were crucial political indicators. And there has long been a tendency among some Chinese to feel uncomfortable about Karl Marx on the grounds that he is irrelevant to the Chinese situation: he wrote long ago about far-off places whose conditions, even then, bore little resemblance to the Chinese scene.

In practice, the alien quality of Karl Marx may be the most important contribution which he has to make to China. The Chinese Communist Party could easily have turned into a narrow nationalist organisation unable to come to terms with the outside world, rather like the rulers of Albania or North Korea. By sticking to the Marxist heritage and by being forced through the bitter polemic with the Soviet Union to prove its Marxist orthodoxy, the Communist Party has driven deep into

Chinese thinking a very substantial non-Chinese element. The fact that the aims and attitudes of Marxism are shared by a great many other societies in Asia and the rest of the world means that the ruling philosophy of China is linked to an internationally well-understood intellectual system.

Karl Marx can be described, therefore, as important to the Chinese nation in the final decades of the twentieth century because he has furnished the country with a set of concepts and a vocabulary which are readily understood even by non-communist countries. Marxism, like it or not, ensures that China is a member of a wider international community instead of being isolated by the weight of its own culture and the vastness of its own problems.

It is also significant that the current leadership of the Chinese Communist Party sees a proper interpretation of Marxism as requiring the nation to maintain an open-door policy towards the outside world. Which is very appropriate, since Karl Marx himself represents a refusal to be restricted by national boundaries: A German exile, writing in England, whose ideas triumphed first in Russia and are now enshrined in the Chinese constitution.

FOOTNOTES:

1. See David Caute The Fellow-Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment (1973); Paul Hallard Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China, and Arba (1981).

2. Werner Stark discusses this matter very helpfully in The Contained Economy: An Interpretation of Medieval Economic Thought (Aquinas Paper No. 26).

3. Michio Morishima Marx's Economics: A dual theory of value and growth (1973).