

The Crisis of Marxism

By Louis Althusser

I shall limit myself to a brief reflection on the situation which we are living through. Because our interest in the exiles from Eastern Europe is not only based on a need for information, nor just a manifestation of solidarity. What is happening in the Eastern countries involves us directly. For what is happening there is also happening to us. Everything which goes on in these countries is of immediate concern to us, and has an impact on our points of view, the objectives of our struggle, our theory, our battles and ways of working.

I must apologise in advance for presenting my comments, in the space of a few minutes, rather roughly and schematically- without the necessary nuances. But for a certain time now people have been starting to talk among themselves about a *crisis of Marxism*. In her opening remarks Rossana Rossanda¹ used this phrase.

There are phrases which have played such a dubious role in the history of social struggles that you hesitate to use them. For a century, the phrase "the crisis of Marxism" has itself been used over and over again by enemies of the Labour Movement- but for their own purposes, in order to predict its collapse and death. They have exploited the difficulties, the contradictions and the failures of the Labour Movement in the interest of the class struggle of the bourgeoisie. Today they are exploiting the horrors of the Soviet camps and their sequels against Marxism. Intimidation also has its place in the class struggle.

We must meet the challenge of this intimidation by taking up the phrase "the crisis of Marxism", but giving it a completely different sense from collapse and death. We have no reason to be afraid of the term. Marxism has experienced other periods of crisis e.g., the one which led to the "bankruptcy" of the Second International, its desertion to the camp of class collaboration. But Marxism survived. We must not be afraid to use the phrase: it is clear from many signs that today Marxism is once again in crisis, and that this crisis is an open one. Which means visible to everyone, including our enemies, who are doing everything in their power to exploit the situation. But we are accustomed to these diversionary tactics. We, ourselves, can not only see the crisis: we are *living through it*, and have been for a long time.

What is this crisis of Marxism? A phenomenon which must be grasped at the historical and world level, and which concerns the difficulties, contradictions and dilemmas in which the revolutionary organisations of struggle based on the Marxist tradition are now involved. Not only is the unity of the International Communist Movement affected, and its old forms of organisation destroyed, but its own history is put in question, together with its traditional strategies and practices. Paradoxically, at the moment of the most serious crisis which imperialism has ever known, at a moment when the struggles of the working class and of the people have reached unprecedented levels, the different Communist Parties are all going their own separate ways. The fact that the contradiction between different strategies and practices is having its own effects on Marxist theory itself is only a secondary aspect of this profound crisis.

Something which has "snapped"

At its most direct, most obvious level, this crisis is expressed in remarks like those made here yesterday by our comrades, the workers of Mirafiore. They said: for many of us, something has "snapped" in the history of the labour movement between its past and present, something which makes its future unsure. At least at first sight, and perhaps also at a deeper level. For *it is a fact* that it is no longer possible today, as it was, to "integrate" the past and the present, to "integrate" on the one hand October 1917, the enormous world role of the Soviet Revolution, as well as Stalingrad, with on the other hand the horrors of the Stalin regime and the oppressive Brezhnev system. These same comrades said that if it is no longer possible, as it used to be, to hold the past and present together, it is because there no longer exists in the minds of the masses any "achieved ideal", any really living reference for socialism. We are told that the countries of Eastern Europe are socialist countries, but that nevertheless, for us, socialism is something quite different. This simple fact did not of course pass by unnoticed: it gave rise to the shock effect of the 20th Congress of the CPSU, and was taken up and expressed in the repeated declarations of the leaders of the Western Communist Parties to the effect that "there is no single model of socialism", that "we reject the idea of models", etc. That is all true, but it does not provide an answer to the question posed by the masses. For you cannot really hope to *grasp* the present situation simply by arguing that there are "several paths to socialism". Because in the last resort you cannot then avoid the other question: what will prevent this "different type of socialism", arrived at by a different path, from ending up just like the existing forms of socialism? And the answer to this question depends on another: why and how did Soviet socialism lead to Stalin and to the present regime?

But this last, key question, has not been properly answered.

The crisis which we are living through has been aggravated by a special circumstance. Not only has something "snapped" in the history of the Com-

unist movement, not only has the USSR "moved on" from Lenin to Stalin and Brezhnev, but the Communist Parties themselves, organisations of class struggle claiming to base themselves on Marx, have not really provided any explanation of this dramatic history- twenty years after the 20th Congress of the Soviet Party! They have either been unwilling or unable to do so. And behind their reticence or politically motivated refusals, behind the ridiculous phrases which we know only too well ("the personality cult", "violations of socialist legality", "the backwardness of Russia", not to speak of the way in which we have been repeatedly assured that "the USSR has built the foundations for democracy- just wait a little longer and it will come to flower"), behind all this there lies something more serious: that is, the extreme difficulty (everyone working seriously on the problem knows this very well) and perhaps even, in the present state of our theoretical knowledge, almost the impossibility of providing a really satisfactory Marxist explanation of a history which was, after all, made in the name of Marxism! If this difficulty is not a simple myth, it means that we are now living through a situation which is revealing to us the limits in Marxist theory, and behind these limits some critical differences.

I think that we must go so far as to say that the crisis of Marxism has not spared Marxist theory: it does not take place outside of the theoretical sphere, in a simple historical domain of chance, accidents and dramas. As Marxists we cannot satisfy ourselves with the idea that Marxist theory exists somewhere, in pure form, without being involved in and compromised by the hard task of the historical struggles and their results in which it is directly concerned, as a "guide" to action. It would be quite idealistic, as Marx ceaselessly pointed out, to consider that Marxist theory is, as a theory, responsible for the history made in its name: it is not "ideas", not even Marxist ideas, which make "history", just as it is not "self-consciousness" (the self-application of the name "Marxist") which defines a man or an organisation. But it would be equally idealistic to consider that Marxist theory is not involved in and compromised by the hard test of history in which the actions of organisations of class struggle inspired by Marxism or calling themselves Marxist have played an important or determining role. A Marxist only has to take seriously the argument concerning the primacy of practice over theory in order to recognise that Marxist theory really is involved in the political practice which it inspires or which uses it as a reference: in its strategic and organisational dimensions, in its ends and means. The forms and effects of this involvement necessarily reflect back on the theory, provoking or revealing conflicts, changes, differences and deviations: these forms and these effects themselves have a political dimension. It is in this sense that Fernando Claudin spoke, as long as eight years ago, of a "theoretical crisis", in order to analyse the crisis of the International Communist Movement, and that Bruno Trentin referred a short while ago to organisational questions (the relation between party and trades unions) as themselves having a theoretical meaning and importance.

It is in this profoundly political sense that we are forced today, it seems to me, to speak of a theoretical crisis within Marxism, in order to clarify the ways in which it affects what is called Marxist theory itself: and in particular the fact that a number of apparently infallible principles inherited from the Second and Third Internationals have now been placed in doubt. It is only too clear that we cannot escape from the shock effects provoked by the crisis of the International Communist Movement, whether open (the Sino-Soviet split) or veiled (between the Soviet and Western Communist Parties), nor from the question posed by the ceremonial or silent abandonment of principles as important as that of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" without any demonstrable theoretical or political reason, nor again from the problems posed by the uncertain perspectives of the present struggles. The obvious political dead-ends, the diversity of strategies, their contradictions, the confusion produced by different ways of speaking and different references- all these have an evident political significance, which must have an impact on Marxist theory itself. This in fact poses a number of problems for Marxist theory, not only with regard to the contradictions of the present historical situation, but also with regard to its own character.

Three reactions to the crisis of Marxism

In these circumstances, if we leave aside the exploitation of Marxism by its enemies, we can, very schematically, distinguish three reactions to this crisis.

1. The first reaction, characteristic of certain Communist Parties, is to close their eyes so as not to see, to keep quiet: in spite of the general disaffection from which it suffers among the masses and young people of Eastern Europe, Marxism continues to be the official theory and ideology there. Officially there is no crisis of Marxism, it is an invention of the enemies of Marxism. Other parties take account of the problem, and in a pragmatic manner take their distance on certain selected points, or on others "abandon" a number of "embarrassing" formulae, but always keeping up appearances: they do not call the crisis by its name.

2. The second consists in absorbing the shock of the crisis, in living through it and suffering under it, while at the same time looking for genuine reasons for hope in the power of the Labour Movement and the movement of the people. No-one among us can entirely avoid this reaction, which is however accompanied by many questions and doubts. Because you cannot go on forever living with a minimum of perspective and reflection on an historical phenomenon of such great importance: the power of the Labour Movement is a reality, that is true, but it cannot alone take the place of a proper explanation, perspective and distance.

3. The third type of reaction is precisely to view the matter with sufficient historical, theoretical and political perspective, in order to try to discover- even if the task is not easy- the character, meaning and implications of the crisis. If we succeed in this, we can then start talking in a different way, and emerging from a long history, instead of

stating that "Marxism is in crisis", we can say: "At last the crisis of Marxism has exploded! At last it is in full view! At last something vital and alive can be liberated by this crisis and in this crisis!"

This is not just a paradoxical way of presenting the question, nor merely an arbitrary way of turning it on its head. In using the term "finally", I mean to draw attention to a point which is in my opinion crucial: that the crisis of Marxism is not a recent phenomenon; it does not date only from recent years, nor even from the crisis of the International Communist Movement, which opened publicly with the Sino-Soviet split and has been deepened by the "differences" between the Western and Soviet Communist Parties; it does not even date from the 20th Congress of the CPSU. Even if it has only come to public attention since the crisis of the International Communist Movement broke out, the crisis of Marxism is actually much older.

A blocked crisis

If the crisis of Marxism has exploded, if it has now at the end of a long process become visible, that is because it has been hatching for a very long time: within forms which have *prevented* it from exploding. Without trying to go back into history in order to find the first steps or causes of this crisis in a more distant period of history, we can say that *for us*, very schematically, the crisis of Marxism emerged in the 1930s: and at the same time as it emerged, was suppressed. It was in the 1930s that Marxism- which had been alive, living from its own contradictions- became blocked, entrenched in "theoretical" formulae, within a line and in practices imposed by the historical control of Stalinism. In resolving the problems of Marxism in his own way, Stalin imposed "solutions" whose effect was to block the crisis which these solutions had themselves provoked and reinforced. In transgressing what Marxism had been, even within the framework of its own elementary character and difficulties, Stalin in effect provoked a serious crisis in Marxism, but with the same means he blocked the crisis and prevented it from exploding.

The situation which we are living through today does therefore have this advantage: that at the end of a long and tragic history, this crisis has indeed finally exploded, and in conditions which oblige us to take a fresh view, and may allow new life to be breathed into Marxism. Of course, not every crisis contains in itself, of itself, the promise of a new future and liberation. Nor can a mere understanding of the crisis guarantee that this future will ever arrive. That is why it would be wrong to relate the "explosion" of the crisis of Marxism simply to the dramatic history which led to the 20th Congress of the CPSU and to the crisis of the International Communist Movement. In order to understand the conditions which led to the "explosion" of the crisis, to its becoming a living force, we must also look at the other side of the matter: not only what is dying off, but what is emerging to take its place: the power of an unprecedented mass movement of the workers and of the people, which has at its disposal new historical forces and potentialities. If we can today speak of the crisis of Marxism in terms of possible liberation and

renewal, it is because of the historical power and capacities of this mass movement. It is this movement which has opened a breach in our closed history, and which in its repeated endeavours (the Popular Fronts, the Resistance), therefore both in its defeats and in its victories (Algeria, Vietnam) and in the daring challenges of 1968 in France, Czechoslovakia and elsewhere in the world, finally swept aside the system of obstacles and provided Marxism with a real chance of liberation.

But these first signs of liberation are also a warning. We cannot content ourselves with turning backwards to the past, towards positions which we consider to have simply been distorted or betrayed. The crisis through which we are living forces us to change something in our relation to Marxism, and in consequence, to change something in Marxism itself.

We cannot in fact accept that everything is solved simply by invoking the role of Stalin. We cannot consider our historical, political and even theoretical tradition as a *pure* heritage, which was distorted by an individual called Stalin, or by the historical period which he dominated. There is no original "purity" of Marxism that only has to be rediscovered. During the whole testing period of the 1960s when we, in our different ways, went "back to the classics", when we read or re-read Marx, Lenin and Gramsci, trying to find in them a living Marxism, something which was being snuffed out by Stalin-type formulae and practices, we were all forced, each in his own way, even within our differences, to admit the obvious- namely, that our theoretical tradition is not "pure"; that, contrary to Lenin's over-hasty phrase, Marxism is not a "block of steel", but contains difficulties, contradictions and gaps, which have also played, at their own level, their role in the crisis, as they already did at the time of the Second International, and even at the beginning of the Third (Communist) International, while Lenin was still alive.

The contradictions in Marxism

This is why I am tempted to say: we are now faced with the vital necessity of reviewing very closely a certain idea which we formed, in history and in the struggle, of these authors, of Marx, Lenin, Gramsci and Mao- an idea which, *in spite of our critical efforts*, we have depended on for too long and which we still sometimes cling to. Our chosen authors provided us with a set of theoretical elements of an unprecedented and priceless kind. But we must remember Lenin's perfectly clear phrase: Marx "gave us the corner-stones...". None of the classics gave us a unified and finished whole, but a set of works comprising a number of solid theoretical principles and analyses, *mixed up with* difficulties, contradictions and gaps. There is nothing astonishing about that. If they provided us with the beginnings of a theory of the conditions and forms of the class struggle in capitalist societies, it is nevertheless absurd to consider that this theory could have been born in a "pure" and complete form. Besides, for a materialist, what could the idea of a pure and complete theory mean? And how could we imagine that a theory of the conditions and forms of the class struggle which denounced the hold and the

weight of the dominant ideology could completely escape, from its first moments, from this very ideology, without being marked by it in some way, even in the struggle to break with it? How could we imagine that, in its political and ideological history, this theory could have escaped from any back-lash, from any contagion by the dominant ideology? The break with this ideology is a struggle, but it is a struggle which never comes to an end- a truth which we had to pay for dearly in order to learn. And since even the unpublished papers and the mere study notes of the classic authors are now being dug up, justifying a certain required idea about these authors, let us be honest enough to recognise that these men, who were advancing in unknown territory, were- whatever their qualities- simple men: they were searching and discovering, but also hesitating, exposed to the mistakes, to the constant need for correction and to the errors bound up with all research. There is nothing surprising, therefore, in the fact that their works bear the mark of the ideas of their "time", that they contain difficulties, contradictions and gaps.

It is very important today to realise that these manifest difficulties, contradictions and gaps do exist, and to take full and clear account of them, both in order to draw the consequences for our own situation, to clarify certain aspects of the crisis which we are living through, and to recognise its liberating aspect, to appreciate the historical opportunity which it offers us, provided that we are able to put things right. For certain of these difficulties touch precisely on vital points of the present crisis.

In order to make the point clearer, I shall give some very rough examples.

Exploitation, State and class struggle

In the work of Marx himself, in particular in *Capital*, there exists a theoretical unity which- as we are beginning to see quite clearly- is in large part fictitious. I am not just referring to the fact that Marx thought it necessary to begin ("every beginning is difficult...") in all sciences") with an analysis of commodities, therefore of value (which poses many problems), but to the effects of this beginning and of a unity of thought imposed on *Capital* which manifestly correspond to a certain idea of Marx himself concerning the kind of unity which ought to be displayed by a true theory. One of the most important of these effects is connected with the question of surplus value. When you read Section 1 of Book 1 of *Capital*, you find a theoretical presentation of surplus value: it is an arithmetical presentation, in which surplus value is *calculable*, defined by the difference (in value) between the value produced by labour power on the one hand, and the value of the commodities necessary for the reproduction of this same labour power (wages) on the other. And in this arithmetical presentation of surplus value, labour power figures purely and simply as a commodity. It is clear that this arithmetical presentation of surplus value conforms with the order of exposition followed by Marx: it therefore depends on his "starting point" and on

subsequent distinctions (constant capital transferring a part of its value to the commodity, variable capital invested in labour power). *Even if* we were to accept this starting point, this beginning, and these distinctions, we should still be forced to note that the presentation of surplus value as a mere calculable quantity- which thus completely ignores the conditions of extraction of surplus value (conditions of labour) and the conditions of the reproduction of labour power- may lead to a very strong temptation: *for this (arithmetical) presentation of surplus value may be taken for a complete theory of exploitation*, causing us to neglect the conditions of labour and of reproduction. Marx does however talk about these conditions- but in other chapters of this work, the so-called "concrete" or "historical" chapters, which in fact stand *outside* of the order of exposition (the chapters on the working day, on manufacture and modern industry, on primitive accumulation, etc.). This naturally poses the question of the presuppositions and concepts bound up with this "order of exposition", which have produced certain practical consequences. You can in fact seriously question whether this misunderstanding concerning the arithmetical presentation of surplus value, taken for a complete theory of exploitation, has not finally constituted a theoretical and political obstacle, in the history of the Marxist Labour Movement, to a correct understanding of the conditions and forms of exploitation, and whether this restrictive conception of exploitation (as a purely calculable quantity) and of labour power (as a simple commodity) has not contributed in part to a classical division of tasks in the class struggle between the economic struggle and the political struggle, therefore to a restrictive conception of each form of struggle, which began to hinder, and is today still hindering the broadening of the forms of the whole working class and people's struggle.

There are other difficulties in Marx, and also many enigmas. For example, the enigma of philosophy, and in particular of the dialectic, on which Marx said nothing except to propose a few formulae too schematic to be taken literally and too equivocal to be thought through. There is the question of the relation between the dialectic in Marx and in Hegel. There is a lot at stake in this question, in spite of its apparently very abstract and philosophical character: it concerns the conception of necessity and of history, and of forms of history (does it have a meaning and an end? Is the collapse of capitalism inevitable? etc.) i.e. the conception of the class struggle and of revolutionary action. Marx's silence, and the difficulty of reconstituting his philosophical positions on the basis of his writings, did in fact- with some exceptions (Lenin, Gramsci)- open the road to positivism and evolutionism, whose forms were fixed and frozen for thirty years by Stalin's chapter on "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" in the *Short History of the CPSU(B)*.

Another example. There exist in Marx and Lenin two theoretical gaps of great importance: on the one hand on the State, on the other hand on the organisations of class struggle.

We have to be frank about it: there does not *really* exist any "Marxist theory of the State". Not that Marx and Lenin tried to dodge the ques-

tion- it lies at the heart of their political thought. But what you find in the classical authors is above all, in the form of the establishment of a relation between class struggle and class rule (decisive indications, but left unanalysed), only a repeated warning to avoid all the bourgeois conceptions of the State: therefore a negative demarcation line and definition. Marx and Lenin do say that there exist "types of State", But how does the State ensure class rule, how does the State apparatus function? Neither Marx nor Lenin begin to analyse these questions. In this light, something pathetic strikes you when you re-read the lecture given by Lenin on July 11, 1919 at the Sverdlov University *On the State*. He insists: this is a difficult, a very complicated question...Over and over again, Lenin repeats: the State is a special machine, a special apparatus, continually making use of the term "special" in order to point out very clearly that the State is not a machine like other machines- but without ever succeeding in telling us what "special" might mean here (nor "machine", nor "apparatus"). Something pathetic strikes you when you re-read in the same light Gramsci's little equations written in prison (the State= coercion+ hegemony, dictatorship+ hegemony, force+ consensus, etc.) which are the expression less of a theory of the State than of a search, in terms borrowed from "political science" as much from Lenin, for a political line aiming at the conquest of State power by the working class. The pathos of Lenin and of Gramsci comes from the fact that they attempt to transcend the classical negative definition- but gropingly, and without success.

But this question of the State is today vital for the labour and people's movement: vital for the comprehension of the countries of Eastern Europe where the State, far from "withering away", is drawing increased power from its fusion with the Party; vital when the question is posed of how the forces of the people are to obtain power and to work in the direction of a revolutionary democratic transformation of the State, with a view to its withering away.

Analogously, you will not find in the Marxist heritage any real theory of the organisations of class struggle, and above all of political parties and trade unions. There do of course exist political, therefore practical arguments concerning parties and trade unions, but nothing which really allows us to grasp their functioning, including the forms of their malfunctioning. The Labour Movement did long ago begin to equip itself with trade unionist and political organisations of struggle, on the basis of its own traditions but also on the basis of existing bourgeois organisations (including, where necessary, the military model). These forms have been conserved and modified: they have a whole history, which they have survived. In the East as in the West we are confronted with the grave problem of the relation existing between these organisations and the State: with the problem, in the East, of the fusion of these organisations with the State, an open fusion; with the problem, in the West, of the *risk* of fusion, because the bourgeois State never stops trying to integrate the organisations of class struggle of the working class into its own operations, often with success.

Mass initiatives

But these two "gaps" in Marxist theory are bound up with questions which are decisive for us. What is the nature of the State, and in particular of the type of State found in present-day imperialist societies? What is the nature, what is the mode of functioning of the parties and trade unions? How can we escape the risk of an eventual fusion of the State and Party? How can we grasp now, in order to spur on the process, the need for the "destruction" of the bourgeois State, and prepare the "withering away" of the revolutionary State? How can we review and modify the nature and functioning of the organisations of class struggle? How can we transform the traditional Communist image of the Party, whether as "the party of the working class" or as "the leading party", how can we transform its ideology in order to allow it to recognise in practice the existence of other parties and of other movements? And above all- the most important questions for past and future- how can relations be established with the mass movement which, transcending the traditional distinction between trade union and party, will permit the development of initiatives among the people, which usually fail to fit into the division between the economic and political spheres (even "added together")? Because we are witnessing more and more mass movements of the people arising by themselves, outside of the trade unions and parties, bringing- or capable of bringing- something indispensable to the struggle. In short, how can we properly respond to the demands and expectations of the masses of the people? In different, negative or positive forms, in a hidden or open manner, objectively or subjectively, the same key questions face us: concerning the State, the trade unions, and those mass movements and initiatives. But as far as answers to these questions are concerned, we have essentially no-one to rely on but ourselves.

They are certainly not new questions. Marxists and revolutionaries have tried in the past to find a way to pose them in critical periods, but they have been forgotten or swept under the carpet. Yet today they are posed on an unprecedented scale, and- what is all-important- they are posed on the scale of the masses, *in practice*, as we are seeing in Italy, Spain and elsewhere. Today we can say: without the mass movement, without the initiatives of the masses, we should not be able to pose these questions openly- questions which because of this movement and of these initiatives have become *buzzing* political questions. Just as we should be unable to pose them as clearly if the crisis of Marxism had not *exploded*.

A new transformation

Nothing, admittedly, is won in advance, and nothing can be simply changed from one day to the next. The "blockage" of the crisis of Marxism may- beneath more or less "reassuring" appearances- last for a long time yet in this or that party, or in this or that trade union. The important point is not that a few intellectuals, from East or West, should raise a cry of alarm: it might get no response. The important point is that the Labour Movement and the movement of the people, even if it is divided,

even if it seems here or there to have reached an impasse, has in fact never been so powerful, so rich in resources and initiatives. The important point is that this movement is beginning, in practice, even at the price of hesitations and severe tests to become conscious of the meaning of the crisis of the International Communist Movement and of the crisis of Marxism: I am talking here about the seriousness of the risks involved, about the depth of the crisis and about the historical opportunity of liberation which it represents. Marxism has in its history passed through a long series of crises and transformations. You only have to think back to the transformation of Marxism following the collapse of the Second International, rallied to the "National Cause". We are now, in the present crisis, faced with a similar transformation, which is already finding its roots in the struggles of the masses. It can bring about the renewal of Marxism, give new force to its theory, modify its ideology, its organisations and its practices, opening up a real future of social, political and cultural revolution for the working class and for all working people.

No-one will claim that the task is not extremely difficult: but the essential point is that, in spite of all the difficulties which it involves, *it is possible*.

Endnotes

1. Rossana Rossanda is one of the leaders of the *Il Manifesto* group.
2. Fernando Claudin is a former leader of the Communist Party of Spain, noted for his books, *From Comintern to Cominform* and *Eurocommunism and Socialism*. Claudin approaches these subjects from a right-revisionist position tinged with Trotskyism.
3. Bruno Trentin is an Italian communist trade union leader.

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