

Comments on A. M.'s "Letter to Some Friends"

I have been impressed with the work and thinking about both political economy and philosophy that A.M. has been doing. But I am afraid that we (including me) may not be giving it the attention it deserves just because there is so much of it, and it seems a bit overwhelming. This is one reason I'm glad to see not only his work on the major manuscript *Reflections on Materialist Dialectics...*, but also short items such as his recent (c. 12/3/98) *Letter to Some Friends*. (The method of dialectical presentation requires everything from short summaries up to long elaborations.) My comments here are partly in support of what A.M. wrote, partly in disagreement, and partly just my own thoughts going off in various directions, thoughts which were provoked by his letter.

1. The Importance of Studying Political Economy. I am somewhat surprised that A.M. thinks that there is "a great deal of unstated, implicit disagreement over the importance of studying political economy"—at least if he means in our group. And surprised also at the continuation of his remark, "that somehow, magically, good political line can be divorced from a good line on political economy." I sure haven't understood anybody in the group to be saying either of those things.

I would in fact go further—as A.M. himself does in practice—and say that *three* major spheres are inextricably intertwined: politics, political economy and philosophy. Cf. Lenin's great little article, "The Three Sources and Three Component Parts of Marxism" (1913), where he remarks that Marx's "teachings arose as the direct and immediate *continuation* of the teachings of the greatest representatives of philosophy, political economy and socialism."

It is true that many people who call themselves Marxists only give lip service to the need for serious study of all three of these major areas of Marxism, but I haven't seen evidence of this in our group, fortunately.

2. Should We Start Our Investigation of Political Economy by Changing the Subject? I'm being facetious here, for effect. But actually I do recall one of my old philosophy professors complaining that an all-too-common procedure when presenting an elaborate argument is to "start by changing the subject". The reason, of course, is just that other topics always bear on the main topic, and so in order to have some conclusions to work with that are relevant to the main topic, people start by "temporarily" abandoning that topic—and often never get back to it. But actually, this is a poor way to proceed, even if you *do* eventually get back to the original topic. It is not very dialectical.

(There are two opposite errors in studying any complex subject. First, the error of thinking you can "master" one aspect of it without bringing in the other aspects. This is one of the errors that Marxists often call "metaphysical", i.e. failing to recognize the real connections of phenomena in the world, their interconnections and interpenetrations. But there is also the opposite error of trying to study every aspect of a topic simultaneously, without any focus and concentration, which will also defeat any investigation. The correct way to proceed is to first focus on one major sub-area while bringing in aspects of the other sub-areas as secondary considerations, then focus on another sub-area in the same sort of way, through all the sub-areas.

Then start all over again in another spiral, and another, each time getting into things more deeply and profoundly.)

In our case it is true that if we undertake to study one major aspect of Marxism—say political economy—we will of necessity need to bring the other two aspects (politics and philosophy) into the discussion quite frequently. But, at the same time, if we are seriously studying *political economy*, the focus has to be on political economy.

If the *focus* were to shift to the philosophical errors that lie behind errors in political economy, then—even though we would still be bringing political economy into the discussion—we would really be changing our primary area of study to philosophy instead of economics. I have no objection to doing that if people want to, since my own area of primary theoretical interest is philosophy. So if everybody should decide that we need a concentrated discussion of philosophy (such as over A.M.'s manuscript) that is fine by me. But on the other hand, if we are serious about studying *political economy* now we should try to keep focused on political economy, and keep the inevitable and necessary intrusions of philosophical and political considerations at secondary levels.

3. Where are the RCP's Main Errors? Given our shared background, it is inevitable and appropriate that we should set about defining our own views in relation to those of the RCP, which means first of all reacting against and criticizing the errors we see in their line. This in turn requires us to identify and focus on the most important of those errors, the *key errors* that are crippling the Party and preventing it from advancing the revolutionary movement.

We all know that the RCP has been making a variety of errors, in politics, in political economy, and in philosophy. But in which of these three main areas of Marxism do we find their *key errors*?

A.M. seems to be saying that the Party's erroneous "80s analysis" (as I call it), their absolute conviction of world war and/or revolution in the 1980s, though it was/is a major political error, derived from errors in political economy. And that those errors in turn derived from errors in philosophy, with regard to the negation of the negation, on the matter of necessity, the nature of universal laws, and so forth. Thus A.M. says the key to understanding and correcting this big political error is really to be found in philosophy, and that's where he has been focusing his criticism.

I think there is a lot of truth in all that, and that what he is up to is very useful and helps clarify a whole lot of things with regard to the RCP "80s analysis" and on many other issues as well. But I have two big criticisms here:

First, I don't agree with the implicit initial assumption, that the RCP's "80s analysis" was/is their biggest error. After all, if that was/is their biggest error, then since the 80s are long past, time alone could be said to have at least partially corrected them.

Instead, I have always argued that the RCP's biggest error by far is their line toward the masses, their lack of a mass perspective, their decision to give up attempts to lead the masses in their day-to-day struggles (leading them *towards revolution* of course), their conscious decision to become an exclusively propaganda organization (and one focused on a quite narrow range of issues), and their resultant isolation from the masses and general ineffectiveness.

If my point of view is correct, then we should be focusing our *overall* discussions on political issues relating to the masses, having a mass perspective, the mass line, and so forth. This is not to say that we shouldn't also study political economy and philosophy, and to do so quite seriously, but just to say that our overall main focus should be on political questions. (However, if other people disagree with that, I am quite happy to do some serious study and discussion on political economy and philosophy first, since those are also important things we need to do.)

Second, I am a little leery of the reductionism that is also implicit in A.M.'s approach. Just about any political issue can be connected up with political economy, and certainly any political error can be generalized and abstracted as a philosophical error. But this does not mean that we should give up political discussion and only talk about philosophy! (I know; A.M. is not saying that. But I am only pushing what I see to be a slight *tendency* to a ridiculous extreme in order to bring out the dangers involved.)

If the main problems are in the sphere of politics (as they almost always are), then the main discussions should be political—even if it is true that philosophical errors are always implicit in political errors. Of course political economy and philosophy should be brought into political discussions, but not to the point of always taking over those discussions or tending to crowd out politics. I guess you could say that in study and discussion too, I am in favor of “putting politics in command”.

I really do believe it is important for us to study and discuss political economy and philosophy. The developing world economic crisis lends especial urgency to the former. But I still think that in regard to the RCP and the development of our own thinking in relation to them—and hence our own basic development as a political group—political discussion is the main thing.

Nevertheless, we are presently setting out to focus on political economy for a while, so in the rest of these notes I'll mostly address myself to some issues there.

4. The RCP on Political Economy. A.M. expresses the opinion that the RCP has done some of the best work on political economy since Lenin. I'm not so sure, although I would be hard pressed to point to anybody else who has done a better job in this sphere, as far as the Marxist political economy of *capitalism* goes. (With respect to the political economy of *socialism*, my vote goes to Mao and his followers in China.)

Actually, I have long felt that one of the glaring theoretical *weaknesses* with the RCP has been in political economy. What really has the RCP contributed in this area? Certainly not a large volume of original work: one book (*A.I.D.*) and not very many articles of any substance (a few in the long-defunct *Communist*, a few in *Revolution* over the years, and a few at long intervals in the *RW*).

Another major reason why I am not impressed with the RCP on political economy is that they have also championed some off-the-wall bourgeois theories, notably the “capital shortage” thesis whose band-wagon they jumped on for awhile back in the late 1970s. Anybody who pushes that absurd theory really can't be said to understand much of anything at all about Marxist political economy. (Back in 1977 I wrote a paper against that aberration which I have available if anyone is interested.)

Another area of blatant theoretical weakness in political economy was the RU/RCP's explanation of inflation. All their discussions on this topic have been a confused mess of truths and falsehoods (for example, "Quicksand Tightens Grip on Bourgeoisie", *Revolution*, Nov. 1974). My criticism of articles like that (and my recommendation of the much superior Chinese pamphlet *Why China Has No Inflation* (1976)) was another one of the (secondary) reasons that was given for my expulsion from the party in 1977. True, all that was a long time ago, but the point is that the RCP *never did* give a fully correct explanation for inflation in any article that I ever saw.

A.I.D. too, has a variety of erroneous aberrations in it in my opinion, but summarizing that book is a major project that I am trying not to back into at the moment.

Moreover, any group that continually fails to sum up and criticize its past errors and shortcomings is always somewhat suspect anyway. You are never quite sure about the extent to which they still adhere to those old errors and confusions.

I personally think that the RCP's most important contribution to Marxist political economy has simply been the reprinting of the *Shanghai Textbook*, and other defenses (more or less) of existing Marxist political economy. I don't see that overall they have done much in a positive way to develop and extend it.

To judge anybody or anything, you must first have some *standards of judgment*. So let me raise this question: What have been the main challenges of Marxist political economy since Lenin's day? I think they include at least these:

- 1) To further defend, explicate and develop Marxist capitalist crisis theory. This continues to be of great importance because of the unfinished state of Marx's work on the topic, because of some new phenomena or characteristics of capitalism and capitalist crises in the 20th century, and because of all the many continuing disputes in this area.
- 2) To explain why the Great Depression of the 1930s was so qualitatively more severe than previous economic crises.
- 3) To explain how and why the Great Depression ended. (I.e., was it Keynesian "pump-priming", or World War II, or something else that did it?)
- 4) To predict what would happen after World War II ended. (Would there be an immediate return to the Depression? Why or why not?)

Of course the RCP wasn't around at the time, but the Soviet and other Marxist (and semi-Marxist) economists of the day, really screwed up on this one. The Hungarian-born Soviet economist Eugen Varga, for instance, had made his reputation by predicting in the 1920s that the growing organic composition of capital and other factors would soon lead to a major depression in the capitalist world. But he (and most other Soviet economists) also predicted that these same considerations would lead to an early resumption of the Great Depression after WW II ended.

(My explanation for this major error of the Soviet economists is that they failed to take into consideration the tremendous destruction of capital in the war, which allowed the business cycle to start again fresh.)

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- 5) To explain the long post-WW II capitalist boom. A.M. emphasized the importance of being able to really explain this well, and I fully agree with him. I would even say that if any group (the RCP or us or whoever) *cannot* correctly explain this, then their understanding of Marxist political economy must be very superficial.
- 6) To discuss this “globalization” business from a Marxist perspective, and really get to the bottom of it. (And any other possible changes or “new stages” to capitalism/imperialism.)
- 7) To predict the general features and timing of the breakdown of the post-war boom, and analyze it carefully as it developed into crisis.
- 8) To predict how the current international economic crisis will further develop, and finally be resolved, or at least outline several plausible alternatives from a solid Marxist perspective. A.M. seems to hint that this sort of thing may be impossible (because it fails to distinguish between predictions from general laws and the chaotic and accidental development of particular business cycles), but I don’t fully agree with that.
- 9) To critique Soviet-style state capitalism. To show in depth what it really amounted to. To deepen the Marxist understanding of capitalism in general based on the experience of Soviet state capitalism (including our understanding of capitalist crisis theory.) To predict the fate of state capitalism and the revisionist Soviet Union. To successfully predict the result of the Cold War based on that analysis.

By the way, A.M. says that “the laws of capitalism are universal laws that apply to *all* capitalist societies...”, but that’s a bit of an overstatement. The most general laws of capitalism do indeed apply to all capitalist societies, but there are also less general laws which apply only to Soviet-style state capitalism, or only to U.S.-style monopoly capitalism, etc.

- 10) To develop, or further develop, a genuinely Marxist political economy appropriate for the socialist transition period.

I have my own ideas on many of these points, as do others, but the immediate thing to ask is how well the RCP has done in addressing and answering these questions. As far as I am concerned, the RCP has done pretty poorly on most or all of them. It is true that the whole international revolutionary movement has also done pretty poorly on most of them, but that does not let the RCP (or us!) off the hook.

I’m not even sure if it is possible to say what positions the RCP holds on several of these important questions. Anyway, it would be very useful to address these questions one-by-one, giving not only the RCP’s views (as best we understand them), but also other people’s views and our own views. I am, for example, quite interested to know what other people in our group might think about each of these questions.

The biggest task, though, is to review *America In Decline*. A.M. has made the most progress towards doing that, though I think he has a much more positive view of it than I do. I do think *A.I.D.* is a very *important* book for us to study seriously, though I have doubts about how *good* a book it is. If and when I get to writing a review myself, one area I propose to dwell on is their naïve and simplistic reliance on “anarchy” as the ultimate explanation for capitalist crises. (Just repeating the word “anarchy” doesn’t explain a damn thing!) In other words, I don’t think the

only big problem with *A.I.D.* is its “80s analysis” conclusions, by any means. I think there is a *lot* more wrong with it.

5. Is Nuclear War “Unthinkable”? I continue to be bothered by A.M.’s suggestions that in this age of globalization and world economic integration that nuclear war has become “unthinkable”. I’m sticking with Lenin on this one: not only is inter-imperialist world war still thinkable, I believe it is still *inevitable*, sooner or later (as long as imperialism continues to exist).

I think that the next century will almost *certainly* see the outbreak of one or more nuclear wars, at least regionally (the Middle East, south Asia, etc.), and quite likely between hostile imperialist powers (perhaps the U.S. against China, or against China & Japan, or against a rejuvenated Russia). Remember that we are very possibly at the beginning of another major depression. Remember how the world got out of the last such capitalist economic debacle (at least according to my theory of what got the world out of it—the tremendous destruction of capital in World War II).

Further tying this back into political economy, I think A.M. has been way too influenced by all this “globalization” hoey that is going around these days. It is true that “California can’t nuke New York”, but the reason it is true is that there is a single bourgeoisie which owns both California and New York. This is not the case internationally, and I don’t believe it ever will be. I really think that what A.M. is implying by that catchy phrase is that “globalization” is leading to (if it has not already led to) “super-imperialism”. I think it would be well worth while for our group to read and discuss Lenin’s criticisms of the theory of super-imperialism, and to think about and discuss this whole issue in depth.

6. The “Hostile Takeover” of the Soviet Union by the U.S. You can’t help but appreciate this nifty way of putting what the essence of the collapse of the Soviet Union amounted to. Sometimes little phrases like this can clarify more than whole books can. I kind of feel the same way about my own long-time claim that the way to understand the essence of the old revisionist Soviet economy is as “one big corporation”.

And yet, we can get carried away with short-hand nuggets of this sort, and try to read too much into them. (Losing sight of the limitations of analogies and the particularity of contradiction.) For example, if the U.S. has really accomplished a hostile takeover of the U.S.S.R., then presumably the U.S. bourgeoisie is now in complete charge there, directing all the basic developments. But that just is not true. The U.S. (and Western) form of monopoly capitalism has won out in the old Soviet Union over its even more monopolized brand of state capitalism. But the same bourgeois class that was running things there before, is still running them now—with some comings and goings of big-shots, of course. It is quite true that the Russian bourgeoisie is presently forced to take a lot of orders from the U.S. (via the IMF, etc.), but Russia is *not* the 51st state, and it’s never going to be!

A.M. has been strongly arguing that the role of contention in the world (between imperialist powers) has been exaggerated, while the role of collusion, cooperation, and mutually beneficial interpenetration between them has been greatly under-appreciated. (As for example by the RCP in their 80’s analysis, etc.) He’s probably right about that. But I really think he is tending to go way too far in the other direction.

A.M. says that “the RCP was very one-sided, undialectical, in its view that WW III was inevitable prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union. The RCP overemphasized competition inordinately over the collusion that is also of fundamental importance to capitalism.” There must be some truth to that.

And yet, speaking generally and philosophically, which is primary in the world, opposition or unity? According to dialectics, it is opposition. *Most of the time* opposition is principal. To say the world is dialectical is first and foremost to say that there is contradiction or opposition in things, and that it is these contradictions which lead to change and development. Sometimes one pole of a contradiction becomes dominant at the expense of the other, but this does not mean that the contradiction is resolved for all time.

The contention between the Russian bourgeoisie and the U.S. bourgeoisie is by no means over. The form of that contention has changed, which is to say that a subsidiary contradiction has been resolved. But not the basic contradiction, the basic contention between two imperialisms. For now the Russian bourgeoisie is very weak, and may remain so for decades. But there is still contention, and at some point that contention will again become much more serious than it is now.

It is true that the RCP (and lots of others, including me) did not understand the situation in the Soviet Union well enough, and largely because of that did not recognize the possibility, at least, that the Soviets might have to succumb to “a hostile takeover” with no world war. But I’m really not so sure that this error was primarily a philosophical error of forgetting about collusion, and focusing exclusively on contention. I think it was more a matter of factual ignorance about the situation in the Soviet Union. We knew it was in economic trouble, but we thought that just made war more likely. We didn’t know that they were in *so much* economic trouble that they could not rationally resort to war as a way out of their predicament.

And, of course, even then, we all recognize that world war might have broken out anyway, if just a few small (“inconsequential”) things had been different here and there, such as the personalities of a few people on one side or the other. (Cf. complexity theory.) Given how close the world came, I don’t think it is right to downplay the importance of inter-imperialist contention too much!

7. The Universal and the Particular. About half of A.M.’s letter was on this topic, and what he said was first rate. Really excellent stuff.

He remarked that “the universal cannot exist apart from & alongside of the individual.” I guess you could call this principle the “materialist law of abstraction”. This materialist understanding of the universal contrasts sharply with the idealist notion, going back at least to Plato, that abstract entities (“forms” or “ideas”) are the true reality, or at least on an existential or ontological par with particulars (individual things).

I sat through (and scratched my head over) an amazing pile of that sort metaphysical bullshit when I was a grad student in philosophy. You would not believe how hopelessly complex, confused, and ridiculous the speculations of bourgeois philosophers can get about all this!

However, I don’t yet see the connection between this idealist philosophical sin and *A.I.D.* or other writings of the RCP.

I see that I've disagreed with A.M. and criticized him more than I intended to. But I'm not trying to start a struggle or anything. Just join with him in thinking through all these many issues collectively.

—John
(12/17/98)

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