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VULGAR MARXIST

A CRITIQUE OF TSOMONDO'S MARXIST METHODOLOGY

by

J. L. SMITH

Micah S. Tsomondo's paper "On the Application of the Marxian Conceptual Framework to the Historical Study of African Traditional Societies"¹ contains useful insights² into the potential use of the materialist conception of history as a tool to aid our understanding of the underlying dynamics of African communities which, in Tsomondo's own words, "were or still are untarnished by European 'civilization'".³ Unfortunately, the paper as a whole is marred by a failure to appreciate that the Marxist view of the path to socialism as arising out of the material base created by capitalism is not an assertion of "stages" that each society must "pass through", but a view of world history.

To Marx, modern industrial capitalism is important because, as a dominant mode of production, it has imposed its order on the whole world. The bourgeoisie, wrote Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto,

*compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.*⁴

This is the basis of Marxism's claim to universalism. It is a far cry from the "linear view" of history that Tsomondo attributes to Marx. Let Marx speak for himself, in reply to his Russian Populist critic, N. K. Mikhailovsky:

He has to transform my sketch of the origins of capitalism in Western Europe into a historical-philosophical theory of a universal movement necessarily imposed upon all peoples, no matter what the historical circumstances in which they are placed, and which will lead, in the last resort, to an economic system in which the greatly increased productivity of social labor will make possible the harmonious development of man. But I must protest. He does me too much honor, and at the same time discredits me. Let us consider an example. In capital I have referred on

several occasions to the fate which overtook the plebeians in ancient Rome...The Roman proletarians did not become wage earners, but an idle mob, more abject even than the erstwhile 'poor whites' of the southern States of the USA. Beside them grew up a system of production which was not capitalist, but was based on slavery.⁵

Marx certainly shared with the great majority of his contemporaries in the Europe of Victoria and Bismarck blinkering misconceptions of the "backward" or "barbarian" nature of the world outside Europe, and a general ignorance, compounded at times by a tacit acceptance of current race theory, of African civilization. His concept of capitalism's having already imposed itself on the whole world is, however, incompatible with the view Tsomondo attributes to Rene Milton, viz. "that Africa is at the dawn of history and must necessarily begin from the bottom of the ladder of history and go through all the epochs prescribed by Marx"⁶. We do not need any concept of "bypassing" any "stages" to see that, in the Marxist world view, the oppressed peoples of the "Third World" have as much at stake in the common goal of international socialism as those of the industrialized countries. The dynamic factor in bringing about socialism is the international working class which, according to the sociology of Marx and Lenin, is the only true ally of the peasantry and dispossessed of the non-industrial nations. In his writing about communal ownership in Russia Engels says

the possibility undeniably exists of transforming this social form into a higher one...without it being necessary for the Russian peasants to go through the intermediate stage of bourgeois small ownership. This, however, can happen only if, before the complete breakup of communal ownership, a proletarian revolution is successfully carried out in Western Europe, creating for the Russian peasant the pre-conditions necessary for such a transformation, in particular, the material conditions which he needs in order to carry through the reconstruction of his whole agricultural system.⁷

And Engels continues:

India, Algiers, the Dutch, Portuguese and Spanish possessions, must be taken over for the time being by the proletariat and led as rapidly as possible towards independence..But as to what social and political phases these countries will then have to pass through before they likewise arrive at a

socialist organization, we today can only advance rather idle hypotheses, I think. One thing alone is certain: the victorious proletariat can force no blessings of any kind upon any foreign nation...⁸

Marx and Engels had, at best, only faint glimmerings of the role of the anti-imperialist struggle on the part of the oppressed of the "foreign nations" (and, retrospectively, what a negation of internationalism that phrase is!), which was to be so important in the later history of world revolution. But the above quotations make it clear that they did not believe that the European road was one which all nations would have to follow.

Marx believed that the capitalist mode of production had achieved its position of world domination through a process which first involved the development of large-scale merchant capital. This had depended upon the opportunities opened by the exploitation of the Americas, and of Africa:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the original population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signalled the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.⁹

In this early period of "primitive accumulation", expanding European capitalism thus robbed the economies of many African traditional societies of their most vital basic resource - the labor force. From then on, the exploitation of Africa has been inextricably linked to the exploitation of the proletariat of Europe. Socialism, therefore, is as much a universal, international system as capitalism has been. While the precise paths by which the oppressed of Africa will proceed toward the transformation of society will differ from those appropriate to the workers of industrialized Europe and North America, to talk of an "African Socialism" which can exist as an independent socioeconomic formation in isolation from the rest of the world is as absurd as the prospect of a European capitalism without imperialist exploitation.

Footnotes

1. Micah S. Tsomondo, "On the Application of the Marxian Conceptual Framework to the Historical Study of African Traditional Societies", *Ufahamu*, IV, 2 (Fall, 1973), pp. 57-
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-74.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 60.
4. Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, in Arthur P. Mendel, ed., *Essential Works of Marxism*, (New York, 1965), p. 17.
5. Reply to Mikhailovsky, in Bottomore and Rubel, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings in Sociology and Social Philosophy* (United Kingdom, 1963), p. 37.
6. Tsomondo, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
7. Engels, "On Social Conditions in Russia" in Lewis S. Feuer, ed., *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*, 2nd edition, (New York, 1969), pp. 509-10.
8. Engels, Letter to Karl Kautsky, 12 Nov. 1882, in Feuer, ed. *Marx and Engels*, pp. 489-90.
9. Marx, *Capital*, I (London, 1965), p. 751.

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