

From the other side of the tracks

Julius Lester

1969

There now exists a segment of the movement which officially considers itself Marxist-Leninist. Unfortunately it regards Marxism-Leninism more as a temple in which one must worship than a tool to be used creatively.

In speaking of this attitude, Julius Nyerere of Tanzania has pointed out: "...The works of Marx and Lenin are regarded as the holy writ in the light of which all other thoughts and actions of socialists have to be judged...Such people are refusing to think for themselves. They are saying that the perfect answer to the problems of many in society is already known and all we have to do is copy others...In their insecurity they look for a 'certificate of socialist approval' from the country or party which they believe has these answers."

For many, Marxism-Leninism seems to be the obvious solution because it has worked for others. As Eldridge Cleaver put it: "...The only countries which have liberated themselves and managed to withstand the tide of counter-revolution are precisely those countries that have strong Marxist-Leninist parties."

However, because something worked in China is no guarantee that it is going to work here. This is not China. One gets the feeling that many of those who now profess Marxism-Leninism are not looking for the answers to how one accomplishes revolutionary change as much as they are looking for sure guarantees. Unfortunately, there are no guarantees.

As Americans we are particularly prone to looking for simple answers and guarantees. "Headache? Take aspirin. Tension? Take Compoz." Women are told that if they want a man, use Clairol, brush with Ultra-Brite and use Arid. It is no wonder that many of us feel, "Want a Revolution? Take Marxism-Leninism."

When one approaches the task of making a revolution, however, there is no substitute for thinking for oneself. Marxism-Leninism does not represent absolute truth. Marx analyzed the conditions of his time. This analysis was illuminating for Lenin and he used it as the basis (not the totality) for his own analysis of Russia. Mao read Marx and Lenin and Stalin, but he didn't say, "On page 282, Lenin says do such and such."

In fact, Mao did what Lenin said don't do, i.e., Mao based his revolution on the peasantry, not the industrial proletariat. Stalin told Mao he was wrong and refused to support him. Those revolutions which have used Marxism-Leninism (and the Cuban Revolution did not until after Fidel came to power) used it as a source of explanation, not as a set of guidelines.

"The task of a socialist," Nyerere writes, "is to think out for himself the best way of achieving desired ends under the conditions which exist now...Marx did contribute a great deal to socialist thought, but socialism did not begin with him, nor can it end in constant reinterpretations of his writing."

We are faced with the enormous task of looking at the United States of America and trying to figure out how to make a revolution. Only to a limited degree can the analysis of 19th Century Europe and 20th Century China help us. There comes a point where nothing and nobody can help us but ourselves.

It is ridiculous to think that if Marx had lived in the U.S. of 1969, he would have written *Das Kapital*. It is ridiculous to think that if Mao were now living in the wilds of Harlem that he would be writing what he wrote in the caves of Yenan. Yet, too many people in the movement seem to be unconsciously functioning on such premises.

An American revolution has to be based on the conditions which exist in America and expressed in language that is spoken in America. Too many of us talk as if we're in perpetual attendance at some international socialist conference. And we are doing this at a time when America is in an economic crisis, when the average American worker is having his earnings taken away by higher and higher prices and taxes, when establishment publications such as Life are saying, "...the working man is finding the same thing the Negro discovered in the early '60s and the radical student a few years later: The system may be working for somebody but it isn't working for me." Yet, the new left is running around in a maze of Marxist-Leninist rhetoric and thought, which simply does not communicate to anyone who has not trained himself in it.

Neither Marx nor Lenin nor Mao nor Che can make the revolution for us. We can learn from them, but we cannot march under their banner, nor make them our spiritual leaders; and when we use them as our reference we are saying, we do not feel adequate to the task. We feel more secure if they show us the way.

They cannot show us the way, No one showed them the way. They found it themselves.

As long as we regard Marxism-Leninism as a religion, we are impediments to the making of a revolution. If we want to emulate the revolutionary leaders and societies that now exist, we can do it; not by uncritically adopting Marxism-Leninism, but by thinking for ourselves.

That is perhaps the most important lesson we can learn from Lenin, Mao, Fidel, Ho and Che.

fifth Estate

Julius Lester
From the other side of the tracks
1969

<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/88-september-18-october-1-1969/from-the-other-side-of-the-tracks>
Fifth Estate #88, September 18-October 1, 1969

fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net