

# theory+practice

# Can Marxism Survive? Interview with Michael Löwy



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# Can Marxism Survive?

## Marxism, modernism & a new

After the fall of Stalinism there is an enormous debate on the left about the validity of traditional Marxist concepts. This debate involves questions about the role and nature of the working class, the

environment, women's oppression, planning and the market and what production and consumption will look like in a socialist society. Here Michael Löwy, well-known author of numerous works on Marxist theory and

a leader of the Fourth International, attempts to answer some of these questions.  
**W**hat is the impact of the transformations which are developing in capitalism through the collapse of stalinism on marxist thought?

The impact, for now is, fundamentally negative. As the dominant tendency, we frequently come across accelerated ideological decomposition. We are seeing a revision which is not only theoretical, which is good, but also political, philosophical, and ethical, and all these things dilute the fundamental values (which justify the marxist inspiration of the workers' and socialist movements) leaving them an empty shell.  
 In this field, on one side we have, frequent attempts to reconcile marxist thought with aspects of bourgeois thought, like

utilitarianism, rationalism in its individualist version, positivism, or political and economic liberalism. This tendency is attractive to a number of currents or mass political parties, from the Italian PDS (ex communist party), to small intellectual groups in Europe and Latin America (for example, so-called analytical marxism).  
 On the other side, there is a strengthening of dogmatic positions, though this is not the dominant tendency. This involves mechanical reaffirmations of fundamental principles of Marxism, Marxism-Leninism, and Trotskyism, rejecting every attempt to consider the new reality, current events or changes. A certain vulgarisation of Marxism is being reaffirmed. Faced with anything new which questions established theories, it replies with abstractions. Some sectors of the left are looking for simple, dogmatic, classical and monolithic truths which don't cause problems.



## But is there a movement to renew Marxism?

**Y**es, there is a certain renewal. A quite positive element is the rediscovery of the Frankfurt School. There is an evaluation by a new generation of intellectuals from Europe, the United States, and Latin America, of the critique which made it the western paradigm of modernity. This implies a deepening and radicalisation of Marxism, away from negativ-

ity, as opposed to its weakening and reconciliation with bourgeois thought. Marxism needs to confront current problems, to radicalise its critique of modernity, of the paradigms of western, industrial, modern, bourgeois, civilisation.

The ecological question is another factor which radically alters perspectives and also re-invigorates the Marxist vision

of the world. That is extremely important; we are questioning many ideas, like the development of productive forces being positive, or the domination of humans over nature forming part of our emancipation from work. These ideas were inherited from the Enlightenment and the ideology of progress amongst Marxists, and are being questioned today.

This has very important political consequences. The current ecological crisis is a direct threat to the survival of every lifeform on the planet, not only to our little biped mammal homo sapiens. This is a new problem, which Marx and Engels were unaware of. Because of this, we need to review, for example, the concepts of productive force, progress,

technology, as a neutral element, and the idea of domination over nature.

A re-evaluation is needed, but one which leads to a radicalising of our critique of modern industrial civilisation and a strengthening of opposition to it. There is sense of urgency in this: our civilisation is leading us to a mass suicide.

## Declining importance of labour?

**W**hat do you think of the fashionable theory, which characterises the new stage of capitalism by the decline in the importance of work?

**T**here are two aspects to this. The first is economic, with the increase in organic composition - science, technology, machinery, robotics and computers now have more importance - and the progressive decline of variable capital and of wage labour.

This is a process which has been developing for a long time, with the so-called third industrial revolution.

But to deduce sociological consequences from this, as Andre Gorz has done - he says that the workforce no longer has any role, that it has disappeared - descends into economism. These visions confuse the working class as a whole with a specific part, the industrial workers and with the classical production line; this position becomes more and

more anachronistic, and its political consequences are very dangerous.

There still exists a large working class but, nevertheless, capitalism is continually penetrating, on an unprecedented scale, numerous fields from which it was previously absent.

[Ernest] Mandel is right when he says we are seeing an enormous expansion of the working class, of those who are forced to sell their labour in order to live.

The second aspect is that there is a large underclass of people becoming marginalised by the system. In Europe, as in the First World as a whole, there is now a large number of people living on the margins of society. The uprising in Los Angeles is an example of this.

But the problem is much greater in Latin America and the Third World as a whole.

Today it is clear that alongside the growth of the working class there is also a growing number of poor people, people perma-

nently or temporarily excluded from production, consumption and society as well.

There are people who make a living from small businesses, as itinerant traders, as self employed, or from prostitution, crime, and the drugs trade; everything is getting worse.

This is a big challenge not only to the theory but also to the practice of liberation. The problem is to get unity between these groups of people, which I call the 'pooretariat', with the organised working class.

An outdated 'modernism' image? Police attack 24 November demonstration in Lisbon. Photograph: Pedro Mendes for *Combate*



# Socialism and the western industrial paradigm

**I**n what way can socialism be considered part of industrial modernity, western thought, sharing its vision of the world, its values and its perspectives?

**T**hat is a complex question. The idea of Marxism is that the working class is the inheritor of the most advanced gains of the bourgeoisie, of rationalism, the philosophy of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

The working class movement will achieve the promises that bourgeois progress did not carry out. That idea is legitimate so we cannot understand socialism without this element from the Enlightenment. As Ernest Bloch says, concepts such as liberty, equality and fraternity contain a utopian excess which goes far beyond the bourgeois perspective and which will be realised by socialism.

On the other hand there exists, within the socialist movement and within the whole thought of Marx, a vision in which the continuity between modern industrial civilisation and socialism is understood in an excessively one sided fashion.

The necessity for a break with this model of civilisation is not sufficiently understood.

Socialism does not just consist of making the existing productive, industrial and economic system work in a more rational and efficient manner; it doesn't consist of developing the productive forces just through planning.

This concept is not sufficiently critical of the western paradigm of instrumental rationalism and the system of production as it exists. One quite well known example of this is the view of Lenin and other Marxists that Taylorism was an excellent in-

novation and they introduced it into the USSR.

In this there is an insufficiently critical vision in relation to the technical and productive apparatus and the overall relations of production compared to the critique of private property.

It is not only a problem of continuity of the productive apparatus but of a question of how to make urban life more civilised, of relations between people, of the relationship to Nature.

The problem is to know whether socialism itself represents a new paradigm of civilisation or merely a perfecting of existing society.

The place occupied by the motor car in modern society is a good example of what is said above. It is incredible that the whole of economic, social and urban life, housing, leisure time, ideology, and so on are

determined by the existence of the motor car.

It is a type of divine being that demands human sacrifices: every week-end, in every capital city of the world, there are infinite lists of casualties from accidents, a slaughter of men, women, children which is accepted as inevitable, as a natural phenomenon.

There are more deaths than in many wars. There are certain models of consumption, endemic within modern society, that are lethal from an ecological, human and social point of view.

This leads to another set of problems. In the way in which socialism is an attempt at creating a new model of civilisation is contained the idea of rebuilding, rediscovering or reformulating elements from the pre-capitalist past that was destroyed by bourgeois moder-

nity. That is what I call a Romantic element of Marxism, which exists within the overall philosophy of Marx and in part of the Marxist tradition of the 20th century.

It is not a question of returning to the past but of imagining a future in which valid elements from the past - from a human, cultural, social and ethical point of view - which were destroyed by capitalist modernity, can be re-established, though obviously with a new form.

Marx himself speaks about this when he writes about the communal society which existed in the past and was destroyed by capitalism and private property. Socialism will be a new communal society, but naturally not the same as primitive communism. That also applies to other phenomena of cultural and social life.

# Communal alternatives to capitalist individualism

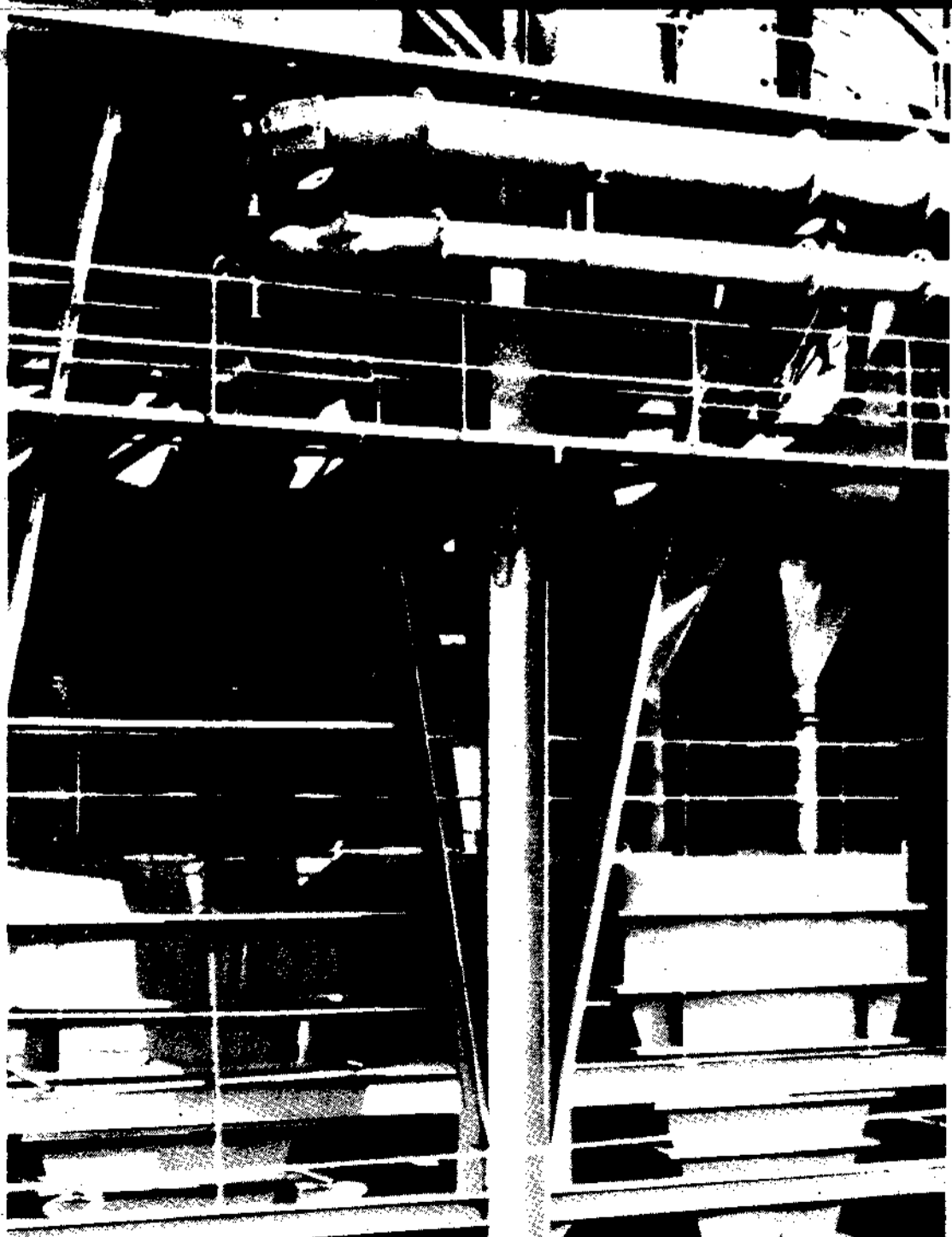
**B**ut is this not in contradiction with the idea that socialist thought is enlightened, scientific, rational and demys-

tifies the world? And did not capitalism dissolve, in practice, the values which gave a feeling of community to human existence?

**S**ocialism is both the inheritor of rationalism and the Enlightenment and of the Romantic criticism of the philosophy of the Enlight-

enment and modernity. These two components are present within socialist thought. Ernest Bloch is right when he says that two currents exist within Marx-

movement presented a communal alternative to individualism based on values of solidarity and collectively recreating in practice communal relationships.



analytical, merciless, scientific, objective current concerned with what capitalism is, how it functions as a system function and what its contradictions are.

The other current, which he calls 'warm', is based on the principles of hope, utopia and regeneration of the world. These two dimensions are equally necessary and complementary.

A tension exists between them but it is a positive, dialectical tension which must be continually kept under review by Marxism in order to avoid falling into a positivist 'scientificism' or a sentimental romanticism.

Concretely, in relation to the element of community, the logic of capitalism is the logic of atomisation, of the destruction of communal links, of the isolation of the individual, of the glorification of separation, egoism and utilitarian interests. It is not just ideology but the whole workings of the system which confronts individuals. To return to the example of the motor car; just by entering an avenue, an individual, whatever their subjective views, enters a war of everyone for him or her self.

There are points of resistance. Originally the whole workers'

movement presented a communal alternative to individualism based on values of solidarity and collectively recreating in practice communal relationships. This movement created a more profound human relationship between workers from the same factory. Equally, this can be found in the ideal concept of the revolutionary organisation. Nowadays, the base communities of the Church, neighbourhood associations, women's groups, cultural movements are seeking to become communal alternatives to capitalist individualism.

These communal structures base themselves on, at least to some extent (depending on the country concerned and its traditions) patterns of thought and elements of previous communal memory, looking back to premodern, precapitalist, mainly rural traditions.

In the Third World, where the majority of the population has rural origins this communal potential can be revived by the trade unions, parties, tenants associations, and movements at the base.

These organisations or movements are not simply an association as a result of certain common interests; they are these things but they need to be much more; they must stimulate types of communal relationship, relationships of solidarity.

International Marxist Review 14

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# Working class counter-culture in retreat

**B**ut today we are seeing a retreat of working class counter-culture. Capitalism is destroying references to pre-capitalist life. In Brazil, in one or two generations, this will have disappeared.

That is true. But the overall functioning of capitalism is provoking, as a reaction against atomisation, a

searching for communal life. It is obvious that this searching often leads nowhere.

This is one of the reasons for the enormous successes of the Protestant sects in Latin America, who give a sense of communal identity to the individual abandoned in this capitalist desert, where they don't feel part of anything. It is up to us to offer other alternatives.

# Scientific socialism and revolutionary 'utopianism'

**W**hat is the challenge we face in re-establishing a socialist project and a utopian perspective, with the credibility and social weight

to be utopian socialism, in a quasi-etymological sense, which does not exist anywhere at present.

If we want our answer to be credible, we must explain what

the transformation of society?

**M**arx and Engels lived at a time when the problem of a utopia appeared an anachronism: for them the most important question was to develop the contradictions within capitalism, the class struggle.

That remains true. But today we are no longer in a situation where we can say 'we don't know what socialism will look like'. We can't maintain this attitude in the face of the terrible burden of 70 years of 'actually existing socialism'.

The credibility of the 'socialist project demands of us the production of an attractive vision of socialism, explaining that it has nothing to do with the so-called 'actually existing socialism'.

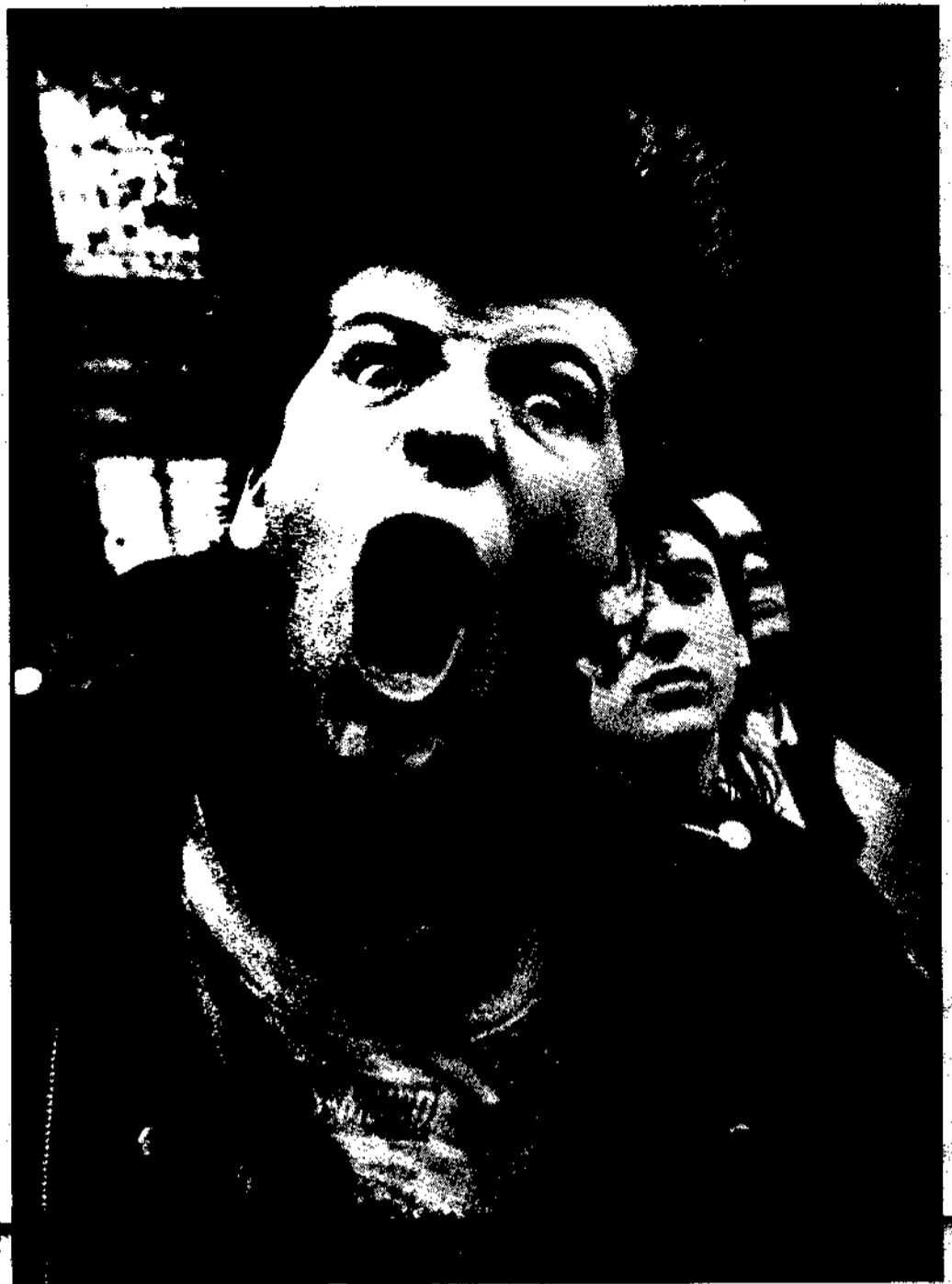
To return to Ernest Bloch, today scientific socialism has also

how it differs from a more human face of capitalism or the pseudo 'actually existing socialism', why it is worth risking our lives in this struggle.

We have to give an explanation to our militants, to workers, women, youth. Without revolutionary utopianism there will not be a revolution in practice. We need to go much further along this road.

Obviously we don't start from scratch. There is a wealth of knowledge accumulated by Marxism itself which we need to develop. There are also historical experiences with all their limits and mistakes, with all our discussions about the nature of socialist democracy in the transition to socialism, etc.

But we must be open and prepared to learn from others such as the utopian and various other socialists, and anarchists.



The urban poor have come to the fore in a number of anti-capitalist struggles. The task is to ally them with organised labour. Photograph: Santiago de la Iglesia, Yanki Sur.

They have ideas and experiences which are important for the discussion about the kind of socialism we want.

We have to relate to these ideas, as well as new problems that arise, such as ecological questions and feminism.

We need to start to elaborate - whether in a programmatic or a literary form - thoughts, reflections, projections, dreams made

reality, as Bloch says, what a socialist future would be.

It is important in this rediscovery of the utopian dimension of some Marxist ideas; for example, in what way will production under socialism be for use values and not exchange values; this is an idea with tremendous utopian potential

What does this mean for production, for consumption? The

problem is how to abandon an established viewpoint and try to see things from a different point of view. And, finally, we must recognise that we don't have answers for everything, on some questions we are just fumbling around in the darkness.

• Michael Löwy was interviewed by the editorial team of *Em Tempo* (Brazil).

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