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MARXISM AND THE CHICANO MOVEMENT:
PRELIMINARY REMARKS*

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To some it is discouraging to realize that after 10 years of the most intensive protest activity ever to occur in Chicano history, accommodation and integration into existing U.S. society are the prominent if not main ideological goals. To be sure, these goals are tempered by the idea of biculturalism, but this modification has not changed the overall integrative nature of the Chicano movement. The masses of Chicano people have only begun to seriously question the equity and justice of the liberal capitalist order in the United States. There are progressive ideological tendencies which are becoming more pronounced both for Chicano intellectuals and for the Chicano people as a whole.

There appears to be an increasing number of Chicanos who in one manner or another are dealing with the writings and theories of Karl Marx. The growing use of Marxian concepts and ideas among Chicano intellectuals is obvious in the Chicano Academic literature.¹ Also, Anglo political organizations with Marxist orientations have a small but noticeable Chicano membership.²

Perhaps this encounter with Marxism was inevitable. There is the emotional as well as the intellectual appeal of Marx's ideas. They provide oppressed people not only with a theory of the causes of their oppression but also with a plan of predicted action that is supposed to eliminate the basis for this oppression. Every serious political movement since the time of Karl Marx has had to grapple with his ideas. In these respects the Chicano movement is no different.

The application of Marx's concepts to Chicano reality, however, raises some important questions which have always plagued Marxism not only as a body of theory but also as a basis for praxis. The purpose of this paper is to speak to some of these questions in the hopes of achieving some theoretical clarity.

One of the important obstacles in applying Marxism to Chicano reality concerns race and racism. Essentially the question is what is the primary basis for Chicano oppression, race affiliation or class position? It is well known that Marx and Engels did not incorporate the race variable into their overall analysis of capitalism. Despite the notable efforts of Oliver Cromwell Cox and other theorists there does not exist a wholly satisfactory explanation of racism developed from a Marxist perspective.³ The Chicanos who have spoken to this issue state that racism is the ideological justification for the class exploitation of Chicanos. The roots of racism are said to be found in the development of the material order of society.⁴

This argument supports class as the principle basis for Chicano oppression, since it offers racism as the ideological veil for class exploitation. The difficulty with this analysis is that it treats racism as a consequence of class position. However, in the development of U.S. society, racism has not been the consequence of class position but rather a major determinant of class placement. The question that should be asked in analyzing Chicano oppression is whether or not Chicanos would have been locked in the bottom of the class structure had they not been Chicanos. The answer is no, they wouldn't have. This does not mean that Chicanos do not suffer from class exploitation, for indeed they do. According to Marxian theory, class exploitation is inherent in capitalist society. But, in terms of relative importance, the racial affiliation of Chicanos is the principal cause of their oppression because race determines their occupational placement within the working class. It, therefore, plays a direct part in determining the degree of class exploitation in affecting wages, working conditions, promotions, union membership, etc.

To impose a race theory on Chicano-Anglo relations, however, obscures the class divisions that exist within both groups. This is a criticism that is heard quite often and which has a degree of validity. However, from a Chicano point of view it is not necessarily true. When Chicanos state, for example, that "they own the means of production," Chicanos are accurately speaking to the high correlation that exists between race and class ownership of the productive wealth in the U.S. There exists no "Brown Bourgeoisie." Anglos own the means of production. This fact can be seen as reinforcing the notion that race is the primary cause of Chicano oppression since imposing a race theory on Chicano-Anglo relations does not necessarily alter the fundamental owner-non-owner class aspect of capitalist society.

Central to the race-class issue is the question of "Who benefits from Chicano oppression?" One argument holds that the roots of racism are to be found in the capitalist mode of production. The capitalist class benefits from racism because it keeps the working class divided on issues of race and prevents them from realizing their common economic interests. Thus, the capitalist class is said to perpetuate racism since it benefits from the division of the working class.⁵

Another argument holds that the white working class benefits from racism because it insures the white workers' virtual monopoly over the better paying jobs. Capitalists are said to be "color blind" since the inherent logic of capitalism is to seek the cheapest labor regardless of race. Therefore, the white working class is said to benefit from racism while the capitalist class loses.⁶ Both of these arguments have plausibility but they are too one-sided in trying to pinpoint which class benefits from racism. Consequently, they overlook the significance of racial awareness and the class collaboration that occurs within the Anglo population when it comes to matters of race.

Class collaboration also exists within the Chicano population, except that it is normally called nationalism when practiced by Chicanos and racism when practiced by Anglos.

Nationalism is an extremely important area of study for Chicano Marxists, not only because it is related to the race-class question but also because it is directly related to the organizational tactics to be used in achieving the socialist society, the role of Chicanos in a socialist movement, and the status of the Chicano people after the socialist society is achieved.

The role of nationalism in achieving the socialist society has both positive and negative aspects. The negative aspect holds that nationalism keeps the Chicano and Anglo working class divided along national lines which in turn helps prevent the formation of working class consciousness and solidarity and the eventual working class revolution that Marx predicted. All forms of nationalism, therefore, are said to be counter-revolutionary and should be discouraged as an organizational principle. This line of reasoning assumes that the working class remains potentially the most revolutionary segment of U.S. society.⁷

The positive aspect of nationalism is found in its cohesive nature. As a uniting force, nationalism is probably unparalleled in history. Thus, some Marxists argue that it can be used in a revolutionary manner not only to unite the people but also to achieve the socialist society.⁸

The use of nationalism towards this end entails the application of the two-stage theory of revolution. In the first stage a nationalistic appeal is made to unite all class elements to resist and overthrow the foreign oppressor even though the class elements within the oppressed group may be

objectively opposed to each other. Once this has occurred the second stage involves preventing the bourgeois tendencies within the oppressed group from setting up their own capitalism. For Chicanos the two-stage theory of revolution means ousting the Anglo oppressor from the Southwest and then preventing the establishment of "Brown capitalism."

The problem with the two-stage theory of revolution and nationalism as its organizing principle is that it hasn't always worked.⁹ In some instances the bourgeois tendencies within oppressed groups have been able to stop the revolution at the end of the first stage and they have succeeded in setting up their own brand of capitalism. This is another reason why some people argue that nationalism should not be used as a revolutionary force to achieve socialism.

In addition to the problem of whether or not nationalism should be used to organize Chicanos there is the question of the role of Chicanos in a serious socialist movement. Their role is important because of the changes that have occurred within the working class as a whole.

The negative criticism of nationalism assumed that the working class was still the most revolutionary segment of U.S. society. This, of course, has been questioned. The working class is said to have lost its revolutionary potential because it has experienced an absolute increase in its standard of living, technology has changed the character of the working class, and the capitalists have control of the major consciousness influencing mechanisms in society. Therefore, it is argued, the revolutionary potential has now shifted to those groups who have not benefited from the gains the working class may have made, especially Chicanos and Blacks. The socialist effort will come from them.¹⁰ If one accepts this premise then the role of Chicanos in a socialist movement becomes very important.¹¹

The role of Chicanos in a socialist movement, however, will be largely determined by how they perceive their current status. If Chicanos see themselves as an internal colony then two facts stand out: (1) Chicanos became an internal colony through the land grabbing of the United States of lands belonging to Mexico; in other words, through an imperialist act. And (2) Chicanos became an internal colony through immigration. Therefore, it could be argued that Chicanos should work for a socialist movement that would consider giving México all or a major portion of her land back. Once socialism in the U.S. was achieved Chicanos themselves would then have to decide whether or not they wanted to become a part of capitalist México (if it's still capitalist) or a socialist United States.

On the other hand, if Chicanos see themselves as an oppressed nation within a nation, then the principles of self-determination and separation become important factors. From a Marxian point of view the principles of self-determination and separation are extremely controversial. Marx and Engels both

supported the separation and self-determination of Ireland, Poland, and the nations held captive by the German empire. Their writings on self-determination are not extensive and really do not go beyond the general statement that each case has to be judged on its own merits. The first Marxist to deal at length with the idea of oppressed nations within nations and the right of self-determination was Lenin.¹²

Lenin stated that oppressed minorities will be found within the borders of most countries. In their struggle for liberation from national oppression the minorities have the right to call for self-determination up to and including the right to secede. Socialists, Lenin argued, should support this demand, since their failure to do so would be counter-revolutionary and delay the struggle towards socialism. Whether or not a secession actually occurred would be settled by means of a referendum of the oppressed nation that desires to secede. Lenin felt, however, that the right to secede was not identical to actually seceding and forming another state. He believed that self-determination, including secession, was merely the logical expression of the struggle against national oppression. He felt that the more closely the nation approximated democracy the weaker would be the call for secession on the part of oppressed minorities. On this particular point Lenin is confusing. Did he mean that the right of oppressed minorities to self-determination and secession was only a right to be practiced before the arrival of socialism and that under socialism oppressed minorities did not have this right because socialism was more democratic than capitalism? Or, did he mean that oppressed minorities had the right to self-determination and secession under both capitalism and socialism? Also, Lenin never explicitly addressed himself to what he considered to constitute a nation within a nation.

Joseph Stalin, however, did propose criteria for what constituted a nation within a nation.¹³ According to Stalin, an oppressed minority made up a nation within a nation if it was "a historically evolved, stable community arising on the foundation of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a community of culture."¹⁴ It is only when all of these characteristics are present, Stalin held, that a nation within a nation exists. If any of the characteristics are missing then the oppressed minority constituted only a national minority, not a nation, and therefore did not have the right to demand secession.

Whether Chicanos constitute a nation within a nation in accordance with Stalin's definition centers around the criteria "community of economic life." It is unclear as to what Stalin meant by this phrase. If he meant that oppressed minorities should have their own economic system, Chicanos do not constitute a nation within a nation. On the other hand, if he meant that an oppressed minority should, more or less,

participate at the same level in the economic system, then Chicanos do indeed make up a nation within a nation.

If Chicanos see themselves as an oppressed nation then their role in a socialist movement would be to work for the right of self-determination up to and including the right to secede even if it meant setting up a "Brown capitalist" state.¹⁵ It is at this point that important ideological decisions need to be made by Chicanos who accept Marxism. If the right to self-determination includes even the right to set up "Brown Capitalism," is this what Chicanos want? For a Marxist the answer is clearly No. In light of this, then would Chicanos want to break away from a socialist U.S. and set up a separate socialist state? Further, what kind of relationship would a Chicano socialist state have with México? What if México wanted her land back? If Chicanos do not want to break away to set up a separate socialist state, then how much self-determination can Chicanos expect in a socialist society that is still a society dominated by Anglos. Will socialism mean the end of racism and racial oppression? The argument that the roots of racism are found in the capitalist mode of production implies that it will. While this may be true, it says nothing about race consciousness which in historical sequences precedes racism.¹⁶ Will the socialist mode of production also do away with race consciousness? If not, then the possibility of differentiation and oppression on the basis of race will always be in the background.

One final point needs to be made concerning the role of Chicanos in a socialist movement. This deals with the organizational tactics to be used, especially in the urban areas. Contemporary Marxian organizational theory maintains that in order to achieve the socialist society people have to be organized at the point of production where alienation is experienced the most and where the capitalist system can be sabotaged and stopped. The dilemma this poses for praxis-oriented Chicano Marxists is that Chicanos are purported to be a community oriented people. This implies that Chicano organizers should be organizing in the community and not at the point of production. To organize at the point of production, for example, is to raise issues concerning who makes the decisions in regards to production. To organize in the community, on the other hand, is to raise questions concerning community control over community institutions such as neighborhood centers, churches and schools. While the two strategies are not mutually exclusive one does not necessarily imply the other. Also for practical purposes the most effective place for Chicanos to organize needs to be settled in favor of one strategy or the other.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Perhaps if an oppressed colored race would have existed in the Europe of Marx and Engels their analysis of capitalist society would have been modified and there would not exist today the tendency on the part of Marxists to treat racism as an epiphenomenal variable.

Further the difficulty encountered in trying to incorporate race as a basis for exploitation into Marxist thought may be indicating that Marxism is not the analytical scheme needed by Chicanos to accurately assess their reality.

On the other hand Chicano membership in the non-owning class of a capitalist U.S. leads one to accept Marxism and to consider the socialist alternative as an avenue for the alleviation of Chicano oppression.

The idea of a separate Chicano nation organized on socialist principles is appealing. Many Anglo Marxists oppose this idea on the gratuitous assumption that socialism in the U.S. automatically implies racial equality. The Chicano experience in Anglo-America, however, leaves more than enough room for doubt that this indeed would occur. Also, many Anglo Marxists are not psychologically prepared to deal with the implications of racism and the problems involved in forming coalitions with Chicanos in order to achieve the socialist society in the U.S.

When Chicanos are approached with the idea of a separate Chicano nation organized on socialist principles the reaction has been that it is unrealistic. This view implies that the existing arrangement of U.S. society is natural or inevitable and not susceptible to fundamental change or re-ordering. This static view is unfortunate for it further clouds the already obscure goals of the Chicano movement. More importantly, it denies the reality of socialism being on the agenda for the U.S.' future and, consequently, it fails to consider the status of the Chicano people in a socialist society.

NOTES

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1. For two excellent examples see Carlos Blanco, "Unidad del trabajo y la vida--Cinco de Mayo, 1971," *Aztlán--Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts* (Spring 1971) and Tomás Almaguer, "Historical Notes on Chicano Oppression: The Dialectics of Racial and Class Domination in North America," *Aztlán--Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and the Arts* (Spring/Fall 1974).

2. Examples are the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), Revolutionary Union (RU), October League (OL), Youth Against War and Racism (YAWF) and the Communist League (CL).

3. Oliver C. Cox, *Caste, Class, and Race* (New York: Modern Reader Paperbacks, 1964). Also see Robert Blauner, *Racial Oppression in America* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1972).
4. Op. cit., Almaguer.
5. Michael Reich, "The Economics of Racism," in David M. Gordon, ed., *Problems in Political Economy* (Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Company, 1971).
6. Gary Becker, *The Economics of Discrimination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).
7. V. I. Lenin, *National Liberation, Socialism and Imperialism* (New York: International Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 7.
8. Tony Thomas, "In Defense of Black Nationalism" in Tony Thomas, ed., *Black Liberation and Socialism* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1974). Also see "Liberalism, Marxism and Black Political Power," in James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle* (New York: Modern Reader Paperback, 1970).
9. Examples of where the two stage theory of revolution has worked are China and Cuba. Examples of where it has failed are Algeria, Egypt, Guinea, and Indonesia.
10. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
11. Several writers have seriously questioned whether or not the working class has indeed lost its revolutionary potential. See Ernest Mandel, "Workers and Permanent Revolution," and Stanley Aronowitz, "Does the United States Have a New Working Class?" both in George Fischer, ed., *The Revival of American Socialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971). Also see Jack Woodis, *New Theories of Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).
12. V. I. Lenin, op. cit.
13. Joseph Stalin, *Marxism and The National and Colonial Question* (Moscow: Co-Operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1935).
14. Ibid., p. 8.
15. Lenin and Stalin both held that the principle of self-determination and secession should be supported even if it meant the creation of a new capitalist nation.
16. For a good discussion on this point see Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1951), Chapter 2, "Race-Thinking Before Racism."