

# Leninist fantasies and SACP illusions: A response to Kitson and Slovo



**JONNY STEINBERG** argues that marxism-leninism, because it theoretically determines the 'will' of the masses, is fundamentally opposed to the SACP's commitment to multi-party democracy

In the last issue of *WIP*, Dave Kitson severely criticised the SACP for its deviation from the principles of marxism-leninism. He argued that the parliamentary democracy which the party advocates, 'the superstructure on the base of a capitalist society, ... will not avoid the inexorable crises which are endemic to capitalism...' (*WIP* 73, p28). Parliamentary democracy, argues Kitson, must be abandoned for the classical marxist notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the only conceivable 'superstructure' under which socialism can operate.

I would be the first to agree that, despite its pronouncements to the contrary, the SACP has abandoned the cornerstones of leninism. Its principled allegiance to multi-party democracy, to political pluralism, to the various 'bourgeois democratic' forms so scathingly rejected by Lenin, place the SACP's socialist programme in a conceptual and theoretical contradiction to the model of revolution generated by classical marxism.

### Flawed critique of capitalism

Yet, unlike Kitson, I greet the party's affirmation of so-called 'bourgeois democratic forms' with a sigh of relief. The post-capitalist political forms advocated by Lenin are rooted in a fundamentally flawed theory of capitalism, a theory which, if it is used as a guide to social transformation, will place South Africa dangerously close to reproducing the stalinist legacy.

Kitson reprimands Slovo for complaining that 'there was not enough in classical Marxist theory about the transition period to provide a detailed guide to the future' (Slovo, *Has Socialism Failed?*, cited in Kitson p28). Kitson is at pains to illustrate that neither Marx nor Lenin predicted the future. What Marx did do, he continues, was to uncover a 'scientific' critique of the capitalist mode of production, a critique accurate enough to outline the only conditions of possibility for the destruc-

tion of capitalism and the birth of a socialist order.

Here again I must wholeheartedly agree with Kitson. Every line and concept of Lenin's 'The State and Revolution' (the only text in which Lenin coherently spelt out his theory of revolution and of post-revolutionary society) draws its inspiration from Marx's critique of the capitalist mode of production. If one has gripes with the classical marxian concept of proletarian revolution, it would be nonsensical to point to insufficient writings on the subject, as Slovo does. Rather, one should look to the conceptual basis upon which the notion of proletarian revolution and proletarian dictatorship arose; namely, the marxist-leninist critique of capitalism. It is here that my argument against Kitson arises.

### The state as an instrument of dictatorship

In Lenin's analysis of the bourgeois state, he insisted that it ought to be 'smashed' so as to unleash real substantive democracy.

For Lenin the very existence of any state is a function of class domination: 'The state is a product and a manifestation of the irreconcilability of class antagonisms. The state arises where, when and insofar as class antagonisms cannot be reconciled.' (1975, p314).

The very separation of the polity from the economy, the division of labour which places some agents exclusively in the political sphere and the majority of agents exclusively in the economic sphere, is for Lenin, a product of class society and a function of class dictatorship. At the heart of capitalism, argues Lenin, is the bourgeoisie's expropriation of wealth created by the proletariat. Yet the reproduction of the mode of production founded on the exploitation of one class by another requires political power.

If capitalism is to reproduce itself it requires an instrument of coercion which is separate from and out of the reach of the masses. Hence, the separation of the pol-



ity from the economy, hence the birth of the bourgeois state, a specialised instrument of coercion, separate from civil society and outside of the grasp of civil society.

It is important to note that for Lenin, the reshuffling of agents within the existing state apparatuses is not sufficient for democratisation. The very perpetuation of a specialised instrument of coercion which operates above society is an impediment to democracy. Hence, the working class's strategic utilisation of its access to parliament is not a viable road to socialism.

Here Lenin is very explicit: 'To decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush the people through parliament - this is the real essence of bourgeois parliamentarianism...' (1975, p342). Indeed, Lenin argues, 'Capital establishes its power, so securely, so firmly, that no change of persons, institutions or parties in the bourgeois-democratic republic can shake it' (1975, p319).

What is required by the proletariat to destroy the private expropriation of wealth, to destroy capitalist relations of production, argues marxism-leninism, is political power. And to obtain political power, the proletariat must smash the bourgeoisie's instrument of power, namely, the capitalist state.

In smashing the state as an instrument which operates above society the proletariat must destroy all the cornerstones of representative democracy, and replace them with forms of 'direct democracy'. Parliament, a plurality of political parties, the separation of the judiciary from the executive, all the functions of the representative state, must be destroyed. They are to be replaced by forms of administration which are rooted within the fabric of civil society, under the direct control of each and every ordinary working person.

These are the political forms of the marxist-leninist dictatorship of the proletariat, 'the political forms at last discovered for the economic emancipation of labour' (Marx, 'The Civil War in France', part III).

Kitson is therefore spot-on in his assertion that, for marxism-leninism, parliament is exclusively part of the capitalist superstructure, a function of bourgeois dictatorship. Proletarian dictatorship, on the other hand, constitutes the socialist superstructure. In marxism-leninism the two are, as Kitson implies, mutually exclusive - proletarian dictatorship is only possible when bourgeois dictatorship is



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destroyed.

The dictatorship of the proletariat is, for marxism-leninism, the last time political power will ever be wielded; as capitalist relations of production are dismantled under the supervision of proletarian government, as the conditions of exploitation are undermined, so social classes wither away. And with the demise of exploitation there is no longer a need for anyone to exert political power. The dictatorship of the proletariat withers away to be replaced by a stateless society, a society where all agents perform both productive and administrative functions.

### **Proletarian dictatorship and political pluralism**

Slovo proclaims that Lenin never abandoned the concept of political pluralism (1990, p11-28). Yet if Lenin did believe in a form of pluralism it is gulfs apart from what Slovo has in mind. Marx and Lenin did not call their conception of post-revolutionary politics a *dictatorship* to emphasise the role of political pluralism!

On the contrary, the smashing of the representative state means the smashing of multi-parliamentary democracy, and hence the smashing of political pluralism as we know it. Indeed, for marxism-leninism, the very idea of finding out or testing the will of the proletariat is bourgeois fetishism. Says Lenin:

'We must also note that Engels is most explicit in calling universal suffrage as well an instrument of bourgeois rule. Universal suffrage, he says... is "the gauge of the maturity of the working class (my emphasis — JS). It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state." (ie under parliamentary democracy). The petty-bourgeois democrats ... expect just this "more" from universal suffrage. They themselves share, and instil into the minds of the people, the false notion that universal suffrage "in the present-day state" is really capable of revealing the will of the majority of the working people and of securing its realisation (Lenin, 1975, p319-20).

What did Engels and Lenin mean when they said that under a multi-party parliamentary democracy universal suffrage can only 'gauge the maturity of the working class' and cannot reveal the will of the proletariat? They meant that the objective interest of the proletariat (and hence the objective will of the proletariat) cannot be empirically discovered; rather, it is **theoretically determined**. Let me elaborate.

### **Determining the 'will of the masses'**

At the core of classical marxism is the understanding that the conditions for socialism arise because the development of capitalism inevitably fosters an irreconcilable contradiction between the forces of production and the capitalist relations of production. The constant need to generate profit under the wedge of competition forces capitalists to increasingly sophisticate their productive machinery, indeed, to increasingly displace workers from production and replace them with machinery. This has two contradictory manifestations which throws capitalism into crisis.

On the one hand, the increase in fixed capital proportionate to labour forces capital to produce an ever-expanding output. Yet on the other hand, the displacement of scores of workers from production and the increase in the rate of exploitation dwarfs the buying power of the working class. Capitalism's huge productive output cannot go to market. *Production and circulation cease. The forces of production lie fallow.*

The capitalist mode of production is placed in the ironic position where it has overproduced on the one hand yet generates mass deprivation on the other. If only products could find a route to the needy proletariat without making a de-



tour through the market, the forces of production would again operate and the conditions would exist for their unfettered advancement.

Because the proletariat bears the brunt of the antagonism between the forces and relations of production, it is in its objective interest to free the forces of production from their fetters, to destroy capitalist relations of production (see Engels, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', part III and Marx, *Capital* Vol 1, chap 32).

It is from this understanding of the 'laws of capitalist motion' that marxism-leninism dicards the empirical testing of proletarian will as ridiculous and instead opts for dictatorship as the only correct route to communism. Marxism-leninism does not need universal suffrage and political pluralism to determine proletarian will. Proletarian will has, for Marx and Lenin, already been determined by the laws of capitalist development.

Multi-party democracy is obstructive both in the path to socialism and in the operation of socialism. It operates to separate the polity from the economy and hence to perpetuate class domination. Universal suffrage operates, under the dictatorship of the proletariat, not to determine proletarian interest but to modulate proletarian government, to progressively transform subjective proletarian interest into objective interest - or in Engels' turn of phrase, to usher in the conditions of proletarian 'maturity'. The universal suffrage of marxism-leninism is, as Kitson would presumably reiterate, a far cry from the SACP's understanding of universal suffrage.

The history of capitalist development since Marx's death has brought attention to the frailty (or the questionable nature at any rate) of Marx's conception of the capitalist laws of motion. And with the concept of the laws of motion under scrutiny, so is the assertion that the will of the working class can be theoretically determined.

The SACP's own research into the South African economy would suggest a refutation of classical marxist economics. The state's current project to construct the new political economy in such a way that the working class is divided into a core and a periphery, reveals a number of things about South African capitalism. The core gains access to relative privilege through the operation of the capitalist market, which is drawn into the corridors of state power. The periphery, on the other hand, is marginal



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to both the formal economy and collective consumption.

The Regulation Theory which the party leans on to glean an understanding of South African capitalism suggests that capitalism can and does regulate the relationship between production and the market (a regulation Marx deemed impossible). It suggests that there is no reason why the market should inevitably fetter the productive forces, that there is no reason reason to believe that capitalism will progressively impoverish the proletariat homogeneously and collectively.

It is at this point that the marxist-leninist road to socialism must be viewed suspiciously, and it is at this point that both Dave Kitson and the SACP must be brought to task.

**The dangers of authoritarianism**

From the above critique of the classical marxist laws of motion, it can be concluded that nobody's class interest can be theoretically determined.

And if nobody's class interests can be theoretically determined then the will (or perhaps wills?) of the masses must be empirically tested. I see no other path to do this other than the path of parliamentary democracy.

(The co-existence of representative democracy and participatory democracy is

conceivable. Indeed I would argue, along with the SACP, that it is a crucial ingredient for a socialist South Africa. However, it is a discussion which is beyond the bounds of this paper).

Kitson's assertion that parliamentary democracy is the superstructure of capitalism while proletarian dictatorship the superstructure of socialism emanates directly from the marxist-leninist belief in the theoretical determination of class interests.

If we in South Africa abandoned multi-party democracy for proletarian dictatorship we would abandon all hope of creating a society whose path is determined by the masses.

We would be embracing Lenin's invalid assertion (despite Slovo's contrary claims) that the party already knows what the proletariat wants because the party has science on its side. We would, in essence, be travelling the well-worn path to stalinism.

**Marxism-leninism and the SACP**

The SACP has abandoned the concept of proletarian dictatorship, yet it has embraced the concept of working class power and retains its desire to see a socialist South Africa. This is far from being a contradiction in terms. Intrinsic to the SACP's vision of the road to socialism is the notion that any party which claims to lead the working class must prove this through the parliamentary ballot box. Indeed, the SACP embraces so-called 'bourgeois democratic forms' as pivotal to democratic socialism. These principles can and must be brought wholeheartedly into the communist fold the world over.

Yet why the SACP embraces these principles in the name of marxism-leninism boggles the mind. Surely it is time to lay the 'revered classics' to rest. Surely it is time to acknowledge that their role in the socialist canon must come to an end.

**References**

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