

A Letter to Mike Banda

Harry Ratner

DEAR MIKE, I read with interest your 'Letter to Liborio Justo' in *What Next?* No.26. Although it was written in 1992 I assume it has been published now with your permission and that, therefore, it still expresses your views. In any case it raises a number of issues which call for comment. On the question of Marxism in general it seems we have both become critical of the Trotskyist brand we both espoused in the past. Like you I find myself in disagreement with the basic premise of the *Communist Manifesto* that "the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle". Class struggle *is* an important feature of society but not the only one. As you say, ethnicity, language and culture played a vital role in determining the conditions under which production and the class struggle developed. The history of society is also the history of national, ethnic and religious struggles. This is starkly illustrated by the wars in the former Yugoslavia. When Croat, Serb, Bosnian and Kosovan Catholics, Greek Orthodox Christians and Muslims were slaughtering each other, which class was fighting which?

I also agree with your contention that "Marxism made the profound error of assuming that the national struggles were being superseded just at the time when imperialist exploitation and Stalinist repression unleashed an unstoppable wave of secessionist struggles everywhere ...". Like you I have been led to a "more generalised critique of the Marxist movement". However, I think we disagree on exactly what conclusions to draw from this.

To recognise that nationalism and national struggles are an important factor in history and society does not necessarily imbue these struggles to preserve national identity with an unproblematic progressive content as you seem to imply, particularly in relation to the Jewish question. Your new synthesis seems to include an opposition to the assimilation of the Jews and support for Zionism.

The erosion of national and ethnic differences that divide humanity into conflicting segments

and the eventual development on a global scale of a multi-cultural and multi-racial society has always been the dream of socialists. This implies the assimilation of immigrant minorities into the cultural mainstream of the countries and regions in which they have come to live. It implies inter-marriage and integration. For Jews it implied liberation from the ghetto and integration into all that was best in the culture and mores of their host country. The societies into which they sought integration were of course not ideal. They were, and still are, capitalist societies with all their exploitation and contradictions. But assimilation meant taking on board all that was progressive in those societies and internationally, both politically (socialist, internationalist and Marxist ideology) and culturally (the best of international literature, music, art, science etc). It also meant a Jewish contribution to all this.

You are wrong to say the Marxist view of the Jews was the political imbecility of describing them merely as a religious community. The Marxist analysis is much more complex. Have you not read *The Jewish Question: A Marxist Interpretation* by Abram Leon, the Belgian-Jewish Trotskyist who perished in Auschwitz? He defined the Jews as a "people-class". As he put it: "We must not start with religion in order to explain Jewish history; on the contrary, the preservation of the Jewish religion or nationality can be explained only by the 'real Jew', that is to say by the Jew in his economic and social role." This was essentially Marx's argument. His formulation of the question could arguably have been clearer but by no stretch of the imagination can he be accused of anti-semitism.

Yet you write critically that "the prescribed task of the Trotskyites, derived from this metaphysical presumption [that the Jews were only a religious community], was to assist this mythical process of assimilation and, conversely, oppose every effort of Jews to affirm their ethnic and cultural identity". But don't you realise that these efforts of Jews to affirm their ethnic identity meant in practice trying to remain in their ghettos, rejecting integ-

ration and inter-marriage and remaining tied to an obscurantist religion that imposed archaic laws completely at variance with the needs of modern life – in other words trying to preserve not just a feudal but a pre-feudal culture.

Surely, Mike, as a socialist, you cannot align yourself with that.

However, the problem was that the road to assimilation was denied to the Jews in the whole of Europe by the advent of Nazism. After the Holocaust the surviving Jews were denied entry into their countries by the victorious Western allies and faced a lifetime in displaced persons' camps. The continuing degeneration of the Stalinist regimes and growing anti-semitism there and the likelihood of recrudescence of anti-semitism throughout the world that you mention seem to bar the road to assimilation. In these circumstances the alternative of Zionism and its struggle for the establishment of a Jewish homeland in Palestine does seem to be justified.

In an interview granted to representatives of the Jewish press in Mexico in 1937 Trotsky admitted that he no longer believed in his former prognosis that the Jewish problem would disappear in a quasi-automatic fashion in different countries by means of assimilation. "The historical development of the last quarter of a century has not confirmed this perspective", he noted. "Decaying capitalism has everywhere swung over to exacerbated nationalism, one part of which is anti-Semitism." This trend, combined with the growth of Jewish culture, meant that "one must therefore reckon with the fact that the Jewish nation will maintain itself for an epoch to come". ('Interview with Jewish Correspondents in Mexico', 18 January 1937, in Leon Trotsky, *On the Jewish Question*, 1970; quoted in the introduction to Abram Leon, *The Jewish Question*, Pathfinder, 1970.)

So I have some sympathy with your dilemma in tackling the problem which, you say, has worried you for most of your adult life and I can understand though not agree with your endorsement of Zionism.

One's attitude to Zionism and the Israeli-Arab conflict is difficult to define in a simple for or against fashion. Historically Zionism has had both a progressive and reactionary character. And many revolutionary Marxists started their political lives in the left wing Zionist movement before moving on to internationalist Marxism. Abram Leon, Baruch Hiron and Paul Widelin (Monat) and many others all moved from the Socialist-Zionist "Hashomer Hatzair" to the Trotskyist movement. I, too, started as a Socialist Zionist and was attracted by the kibbutz movement and, like you, was faced with a problem.

In *Reluctant Revolutionary* I described my

attraction – which, I think, was fairly typical – to the socialist potentials within the Zionist movement.

"A kibbutz was a collective farm settlement run on completely communist principles. Everything was owned in common. Everyone worked according to his abilities, but instead of being paid wages, was entitled on a basis of equality and/or need to food, clothes, shelter and whatever else the kibbutz could provide.... Communism in practice! These kibbutzim were being set up all over Palestine on land, often barren and semi-desert, bought by the Jewish National Fund from Arab landowners. I hoped that these kibbutzim would be the foundation of a future Socialist state in Palestine.... I did not realise at the time that there could be another aspect to this idyllic picture: that Jewish settlements eventually meant dispossession of the Arabs, and that the new Jewish State, founded to free the Jews from oppression, would become the oppressor of the Arab people. At the time we saw Arab nationalism as a purely reactionary movement led by the Muslim priesthood which did not represent the interests of the Arab people. We accepted the argument that the land the Jews settled on was legally bought from, in most cases, absentee Arab landowners who were neglecting their estates, rack-renting the Arab peasants, and living it up on the French Riviera. The Jewish pioneers were not taking over cultivated land, but neglected desert and scrubland, irrigating it and making it fertile. They were cooperating with neighbouring Arab villages, and helping them to improve their methods. We looked forward to a democratic Socialist Palestine in which Jew and Arab would have equal rights."

I also pointed out: "It is difficult for people in the 1990s to realise that in the 1930s Zionism in general was considered to be on the left of the political spectrum. Jewish and Zionist organisations (except the right-wing Revisionist Zionists of Jabotinsky) and sections of the labour movement looked sympathetically on each other, and often cooperated in anti-Fascist activities. Members of Habonim and other Jewish and Zionist organisations stood shoulder to shoulder with Young Communist Leaguers and Labour League of Youth members and other anti-Fascists in the battle of Cable Street which in 1936 barred London's East End to Mosley's Blackshirt march. It was only after the establishment of the Israeli State, the dispossession of the Palestinian Arabs, and the growth of Arab nationalism, that Zionism became identified with reaction.... Eventually I drifted from the Zionist movement, not because I foresaw its reactionary implications, but because I was primarily a Socialist and not a Jewish nationalist." (*Reluctant Revolutionary*, pp.6-8.)

If the left, socialist, current in Zionism represented by the kibbutzim, Hashomer Hatzair and the left-socialist Mappam had triumphed it would have been possible to build an alliance with the Arab peasants and workers in the struggle for a socialist multi-racial and secular state giving equal status to all its citizens. The triumph of this strand of Socialist Zionism would have encouraged a parallel growth of a left current within the Arab nationalist camp. Sadly, in the course of the struggle during World War II and the immediate post-war period, it was the bourgeois General Zionists and the right-wing Revisionist Zionists and the fascistic Stern Gang and Irgun Zvai Leumi, the inspirers and precursors of Likud and Sharon, who took over the movement and the state of Israel. They have now become the oppressors of the Arabs. Zionism has lost any progressive content it might have had and has been captured by chauvinists and the religious right.

The question remains: where should we stand today in relation to the Israeli-Arab conflict? You write: "Israel and the Jewish nation has come to stay." And you go on to say that with the recrudescence of anti-semitism throughout the world the exodus will increase dramatically and that there is no alternative. I assume you mean no alternative to the continuation of the Israeli State. I go along with you so far in the sense that the call to destroy the Jewish State and throw the Jews into the sea must be resisted. But what is your attitude today to the way the Israeli State is defending itself? To the settlements that dispossess the Arabs, to the walls and fences and blockades that destroy what is left of the Arab economy, to the killings and reprisals? My attitude is clear. I stand four square with the reservists of the Israeli army who declared they would refuse to fight any longer in the "war of the settlements" and that "the missions of occupation and oppression do not serve [Israel's defence] – and we shall take no part in them". (Cf. *What Next?* No.22.) I would like to think that you do too.

I would still like to see a unitary democratic and secular state in Palestine including both Arabs and Jews on a basis of equality. However, the socialist internationalist current in both the Jewish and Arab camps is so weak, and the hold of racist and chauvinist attitudes in both camps plus the legacy of hatred so strong, that this unlikely in the immediate future. The best we can hope for is the "two-state" compromise of the establishment of a viable Arab State side by side with Israel. We must support those in both camps who are pressing for an end to both the Israeli reprisals and the suicide bombings, for the ending of the acts of terrorism on both sides, for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the occupied territories and

for negotiations. That we are reduced to hoping for this second-best outcome which, if we are to be honest, we must admit does not resolve the problem but merely mitigates it, is a measure of the historic defeat the cause of world socialism has suffered during the last decades. We can only repeat Trotsky's conclusion that "the fate of the Jewish people – not only their political but also their physical fate – is indissolubly linked with the emancipating struggle of the international proletariat". ('Appeal to American Jews', 22 December 1938, in *On the Jewish Question*, also quoted in introduction to Abram Leon's book.)

What is true for the Jews in respect to assimilation is also true for other immigrant minorities. Socialists must be in favour of the integration and assimilation of the Asian, West Indian and Muslim communities into British society. The concentration of these people into separate ghettos emphasises their "difference" and encourages racism. Not only must white socialists combat racism among the whites but socialists and progressives within the Asian, Muslim and West Indian communities must also combat separatism, reverse racism and religious fundamentalism within their own communities. This means, among other things, opposing separate schools for Muslims, Jews or, for that matter Catholics, the ending of religious services of any denomination in state schools (if parents want religious education for their children they must organise it themselves). This also leads on to the demand for the disestablishment of the Church of England.

However, in this and other issues, nothing is simply black or white (no pun intended). Assimilation and integration should not be forcibly imposed from outside. The Jews, West Indians, Asians, have the right to preserve the old customs from home and their own history. Assimilation must be voluntary and entail not the disappearance of what was good in the old cultures but the *merging* of these with the culture of the host country into a new multi-faceted broader culture. But not all the old customs and traditions imported from the old country are desirable. For example the subordination of women in traditional cultures, the enforced wearing of the veil, the religious orthodoxy are all undesirable. But they cannot be suppressed by force, their abolition cannot be enforced from outside these communities. It is the task of progressive and socialist Asians, Arabs etc to combat these within their own communities.

The question of languages poses a problem. In principle socialists and internationalists are in favour of the development of a universal language. One of the most reactionary actions of the god of the bible, if he indeed existed, was to strike the

builders of the tower of Babel with tongues so that they could no longer understand each other. So are we, then, against the survival of Yiddish among the Jews, Welsh among the Welsh and Gaelic in Ireland and Scotland? Again, we must oppose their forcible suppression. If they are eventually to die out it must be because the perceived need for these separate languages among those who speak them has disappeared naturally and gradually as a result of integration. The problem then is how to rescue the worthwhile culture and history expressed in these languages from oblivion.

Just a few words on the general question of nationalism, national liberation and the right to autonomy of national and ethnic groups. I must admit to sympathy with Rosa Luxemburg's view that the fight for national liberation is a distraction from the fight for socialism; that the nationality of the landlord or capitalist who exploits you is secondary. On the other hand, as you point out, national oppression is a fact and its effects, nationalism and nationalist movements, are a fact. We cannot pretend they do not exist. We cannot ignore the fight of the Kurds, Kosovans or Chechens and other peoples for self-government. Yes, their right to self-government must be conceded. The problem is that in areas such as the Balkans the populations are so mixed up that any viable self-governing region is bound to include sizeable ethnic and religious minorities. Do we encourage a general game of musical chairs of populations to arrive at monolithic geographical groupings? Do we want a repeat of the massacres and forcible expulsion of whole populations that occurred during the partition of India and

Pakistan? We saw how the Kosovans, having achieved (with the help of NATO) freedom from Serbia, proceeded to the ethnic cleansing of the Serbian minority in their territory. The lesson is that one must be very wary of giving uncritical support to national liberation movements such as the Kosovan Liberation Army, which, starting as an instrument of liberation, became the oppressors of the Serb population. While supporting legitimate demands for self-government, socialists must also fight against the chauvinism and xenophobia that exists within these nationalist movements. Support for the Kosovan struggle for freedom from Serbian rule but opposition to the Kosovan ethnic cleansing of Serbians in Kosova. Support for the Kurds, yes. But also calls for friendship with the Turkish and Iraqi people. Opposition to pogroms by either side. Since struggles for national freedom do not need much encouragement from socialists – they take place anyway – the most important task for socialists is the fight against the national chauvinism that taints these movements and for fraternisation and friendship across ethnic and religious divides. The potential is there – witness instances of Serb and Croat Christians sheltering and hiding Bosnian Muslim neighbours and vice versa during the recent wars.

Easy to sit here writing down all these principles but difficult in practice, in the field, to know how to apply them!! Enough of this. I hope I have given you enough to think about.

Fraternally,

Harry Ratner

Housmans Bookshop

The best place in London for radical books and magazines
5 Caledonian Road, Kings Cross, London N1 9DX
Phone: 020 7837 4473 Email: shop@housmans.idps.co.uk

Porcupine Bookcellar

Secondhand bookstore, in the basement of Housmans,
Specialists in left-wing literature
Phone: as above Email: mail@wob-porcbks.freeseve.co.uk