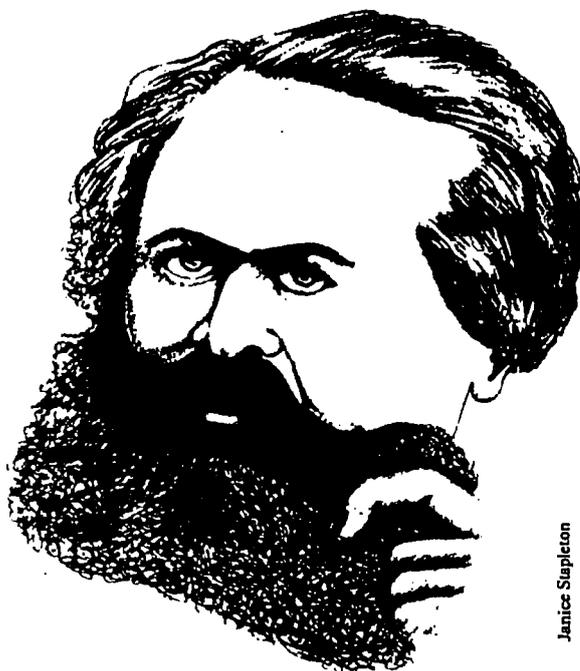


The Arms Race

by Karl Marx



It is unquestionably a rare opportunity that has been given me to comment on developments the world has undergone in almost a century since I was observing it with some regularity. For the sake of perspective I might point out that less than half a century elapsed between the French Revolution and my own university matriculation. I then kept a pretty close watch on the world, particularly the European part of it, for nearly another half-century. And now, suddenly, I am asked to render judgment on what has happened in a period of like duration.

So, despite the extraordinary opportunity that has been vouchsafed me (and it is, of course, quite flattering as well), I cannot pretend to be altogether comfortable with it. To be sure, I was not unfamiliar with the deadlines of either newspapers or creditors, but I think Engels and I were well known to (if not always well loved by) our nineteenth-century associates for the care and thoroughness with which we approached any subject we had to write or speak about. And anyone who cares to look into our published correspondence can easily see how often poor Engels felt compelled to urge me to get on with my major work, which he thought was languishing because of my insistence on thoroughness.

It is therefore necessary to point out that, in hazarding some comments on the world of today, I have had very little time in which to acquaint myself in any detailed way with the underlying patterns and directions of change in the numerous societies that play an active role in the international arena. It might be thought that a comparatively narrow topic—the arms race—of the sort that I have been given would lend itself to rapid, intensive study. But of course this is not merely a military question. If it were, then Engels would be much the better choice for informed assessment, for he made himself quite an expert on military questions. Rather, the current arms race, or any other issue in international diplomacy, can be viewed sensibly only as a manifestation of deeper currents of economic and political change or of resistance to such change. Since problems of such profundity yield only to sustained research and to a

detailed grasp of historical tendency, it is here that I feel my deficiencies most keenly.

Perhaps I may be permitted one further prefatory remark. I have, and I hope that this is understandable, been quite fascinated to observe the widespread currency of something called “Marxism” and the numerically impressive aggregation of people calling themselves “Marxists” in the contemporary world, both rubrics enclosing the most diverse and variegated elements. My fascination with this phenomenon may indeed have distracted me somewhat from a full concentration upon my assigned topic. I shall not engage in the false modesty of feigning surprise that my theories and arguments have retained a measure of pertinence a century and more after they were enunciated. But I do confess to mild consternation over some of the things said of Marxism, by its devotees as well as by its critics, and over the plain incompatibility among differing self-styled spokesmen for Marxism. We were of course not unacquainted with sectarian tendencies in my century, and perhaps I should not be surprised that my teachings have been applied differently by different people to the rapidly changing conditions of the intervening decades. Perhaps it is gratification enough that they are still being applied at all. Yet I must beg of my listeners and readers, if the invitation was meant seriously and if my remarks are to be taken as seriously as they are meant, that it not be automatically assumed that all who invoke my name are indeed my allies or that I seek to defend all that has been done by my self-proclaimed followers.

Proceeding to my assigned topic, as I now must, there is one factor that gives me some encouragement to think that my undertaking is not defeated before it begins. The factor to which I refer is my conclusion, based as I have admitted on much too cursory research, that the world has changed much less since my day than most of you would probably wish to believe. I recognize of course that scientific and technological changes have been enormous, especially in the realm of weaponry, and I shall return to that question presently. I recognize too that the world market, and the state system that goes hand in hand with it, has become vastly more complex and, at the same time, more tightly

Lyman H. Legters acted as interpreter for these remarks of Herr Marx.

bound together. (Parenthetically I should note that some of my second-generation followers, Lenin included, wrote most impressively on this change in global configuration under the heading of imperialism, an elaboration of my theories that I would not hesitate to designate as one of the most significant additions made in this century to the work that Engels and I left behind us.)

It is also plain that the political element has taken on much greater prominence in this century's version of capitalism (a point already grasped by some of the aforementioned theorists of imperialism) as the state has allied itself more openly with its capitalist class. My friend Engels admitted that we may have overemphasized the economic element, because that was the aspect most in need of emphasis, over the political in our theoretical work. I think he may have admitted too much, but he was certainly correct that we never got to the portions of *Capital* that would have dealt with states and their relationships. In any case, we did have before us, especially in nineteenth-century Germany, a foreshadowing of the explicit kind of alliance between the state and capitalist development that has been such a dramatic feature of subsequent forms of capitalism everywhere. Withal, the changes have been substantial, but, with two exceptions that I shall come to directly, the basic framework, and the corresponding mode of analysis, have not really changed. I therefore feel that yours is after all a recognizable world, one that lends itself in spite of massive superficial changes to the same critical and analytical procedures I applied long ago to the examination of an earlier stage of capitalism. I intend to proceed in that manner.

Let me mention my two exceptions immediately. The first is one that old Hegel might have depicted as a quantitative change transforming itself finally into a qualitative change. I refer to weaponry. Some of my critics, and even some of my followers, have suggested that Engels and I were technological determinists. This means, I take it, that when one has burrowed through all of the evanescent and accidental factors in history one is left with technology as the principal agent of change, as the so-called prime mover. One of my pastimes of late, a pardonable one I hope, has been to leaf through some of my own writings and some of those that Engels wrote after I left the scene, and I can see that he may have left the door open to this kind of interpretation. I would argue otherwise, but that would be a digression. My point is that one does not have to be a technological determinist to see in the present state of the world's ordnance a cataclysmic possibility. Engels and I were never pacifists, and we could readily contemplate the necessity of bloodshed as a price of revolution. (Your liberals, by the way, are just like our liberals in their inability to include bloodshed and other miseries in the price of *not* having a revolution!) We could also contemplate warfare and attendant bloodshed as the consequence of retaining the capitalist system, though this seemed to us needless and therefore not to be regarded in a complacent way, and both the trench warfare of World War I and the massive air attacks of World War II would have struck us as foreseeable but needless outcomes of a system that reckoned profits more sacred

than human life. Yet, however horrible the wastage of the wars of our century and the first half of yours, there was not the prospect that human social life on this planet would be called in question by any particular war. I note the grim optimism of contemporary commentators, to the effect that nuclear war would only decimate, not obliterate, the species; my reply (does this make me a "Marxist" or not?) is that decimation is tantamount to suicide where the cumulative attainments of human culture and social development are concerned. An anarchist of Bakunin's ilk might revel in such destructive prospects. For myself it is much easier to consider an almost indefinite prolongation of the class struggle leading to revolution than it is to contemplate the need to reconstitute human social life from a starting point of unimaginable primitivism.

The second exception to my earlier observation about the sameness of the two centuries lies in the overthrow of the reigning capitalist system over a significant portion of the planet. This is a matter of great delicacy for me, as I hope you will understand, for there is no possibility of my disassociating myself from a serious effort to abolish private property and to institute class equality. Some of you may recall that I counseled against precipitous action in the case of the Paris Commune, then praised the Commune in defeat as a glorious example and milestone along the route to working-class emancipation. I have since read of a follower, a Polish woman of rare integrity named Rosa Luxemburg, who lost her life by joining in a working-class rising that she thought ill-advised. I firmly believe that I, had I been in Russia in 1917, would similarly have bound myself to the Bolshevik cause, whatever reservations I might have had about its being the right revolution in the right place and at the right time. Scholastic hair-splitting—a rather prominent feature of twentieth-century Marxism, it seems to me—is a luxury that genuine revolutionaries eschew when action is required.

Nevertheless, given the history of that revolution and its offshoots, I have to wonder if it ought not to be reckoned as a greatly prolonged reenactment of the Paris Commune, a revolution that went astray. I am no more disposed now than I was a century ago to make predictions about the shape and direction of revolutionary transitions; and even as I shudder at the thought of Stalinism as a consequence of my teaching I am at least as outraged by the careerist posturing of the professional ideologues of anticommunism. It even seems, as I examine contemporary rhetoric, that the Russian Revolution has provided capitalism with a most useful tool for prolonging its own life, namely, an ideological scapegoat.

The foregoing may seem to be a digression from my topic, yet from my perspective it remains true that the appearance of a noncapitalist force in the world, however one may decide to judge it as an authentic revolutionary development, signifies a qualitative departure from the nineteenth-century capitalist world that I knew. Engels and I were conscious, though we never elaborated a systematic treatment of the problem, that the synchronization of revolution on a global scale was problematical at best. It was easy in our time

to see the pervasive effects of capitalist expansion and capture of the world market; it was easy for the next generation of Marxists to envisage an effective global hegemony for European capitalism; it now appears easy for inhabitants of what you, following Mao Tse-tung, call the Third World to inveigh against capitalism as inimical to native development (what else might be expected is unclear to me). It was, and it remains, difficult to see how a revolution, which must start somewhere, is to be conducted initially in a hostile capitalist environment so that it both survives and spreads. I want therefore to be as understanding as possible of the Russian Revolution and of the coalition of states that presently constitutes its preliminary outcome. Granting that its intermediate status is glaringly lacking in some features that would count as measures of revolutionary success—notably democracy, but also the elimination of class divisions and alienation in the workplace—I am yet unwilling to discount as negligible the achievements of that revolution.

Whether or not the revolutionary process is still under way, whether or not the promise of proletarian revolution has been subordinated to purely prudential considerations of the retention of power and control, the revolutionary sector has had to accept the rules of a preexisting world political game and has become, thereby, a participant in a potentially genocidal arms race. I could argue that those rules were set by a world capitalist system, and that participation therein by the socialist world is a function of revolutionary survival until the rest of the world enters the timetable of revolution. But when the preservation of millennia of human cultural attainment may be at stake, I am simply not sufficiently persuaded of the authenticity of revolution in the Soviet mold to excuse its involvement, any more readily than I excuse capitalist involvement, in an arms race that, while threatening the survival of recognizable human society, continues to enrich capitalists and to erode what remains of revolutionary esprit in the socialist bloc.

Now this may strike you as an unnecessarily abstruse, even an ambiguous, formulation. If so, let me try to be more plainspoken. I have already indicated that the arms race that so properly alarms you is only understandable as a feature of a particular global system, a political configuration built upon a particular developmental stage of world economy.

As it was useful in my day to struggle for a reduction in the hours of the workday or for a democratic extension of suffrage, all for the sake of weakening the ruling system and strengthening the working-class movement, so now is it useful to struggle for limitations or reductions in armaments. But those piecemeal efforts must not be confused with the ultimate objective. However worthy it may be to restrict, or even reverse, the momentum of the arms race and the proliferation of destructive instruments, efforts of that sort are not the same thing as transforming the system that gave birth to the self-destructive impulse of contemporary societies.

If we are to talk of solutions, we must consider the permanently disfiguring quality of a capitalist-dominated world economy and polity. Modifi-

cations that tend to defuse the situation are useful; indeed, in light of the apocalyptic possibilities of the arms race, they may be vital. They may secure for the human race the time necessary to search for real solutions. But such measures are not in themselves—any more than universal suffrage was in the nineteenth century—the solutions. I have read of Lenin's stance vis-à-vis the Germans at Brest-Litovsk, where no concession seemed to him too great to pay for the time needed to consolidate the revolution in his country. Faced with your arms race and the threat of nuclear annihilation, I might even be disposed to say that, given the ambiguity of revolutionary accomplishments to date, no limits should be set on the effort to guarantee humanity a future in which genuine solutions can be sought. Capitalist and socialist states alike must be willing, all for their own diverse reasons, to suspend political conflict to the degree necessary to secure that guarantee. Although that suspension is not to be confused with the transformation of capitalism that might erect permanent safeguards against an impasse of the sort now facing you, it is the sine qua non of all efforts at transformation.

This is not, I think, a pacifist position, but merely a prudent one, and prudence has always been a part of serious revolutionary strategy. Romanticism, on the other hand, has often been a deterrent to revolutionary progress. And perhaps what I am suggesting here is that, irrespective of discrepant reasons and perspectives, we might all agree that romantic inclinations are a common enemy. Most of the forces making for intensification of the arms race seem to me to be romantic in one sense or another—either national assertiveness, or an impatient putschist mentality, or an archaic and self-deluded notion of “acceptable” risk. Some might rationally oppose those forces for the sake of preserving capitalism; I would oppose them on grounds of preserving the possibility of genuine revolution. My advice, in short, is that neither side can hope for an advantage from the arms race that even approximates the danger to both.

As I come to the close of my necessarily impressionistic commentary, I must return to the fundamental position on the future of capitalism and the advent of socialism that is associated with my theoretical work of the last century. Were socialism to arrive on a global scale and by a relatively compact process, I have found no reason to abandon my belief that it would eliminate the proliferation of lethal weapons systems and the squandering of productive resources on objectives that can only be either useless or infernal. But I never had any use for ritual incantations or any confidence in mere pronouncements. In the continuing anarchy of relations among states, socialist and capitalist alike, the revolutionary project to which I devoted my life's work, and, indeed, human society as it has developed historically, are both threatened with foreclosure by another, much more abrupt and incendiary, process. Fortunately wisdom and sagacity are not qualities that appear only after the revolution, and humankind must surely be conscious of an overriding interest in their application to the problem of avoiding extinction.