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Marxism and the 21st Century World

Lecture at the Communist Party of China's
Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing,

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Director of the Japanese Communist Party's
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I. Marxism as World Outlook

The position of Marxism in the present day world

Hello, I am Fuwa Tetsuzo of the Japanese Communist Party. Four years ago, I spoke here on "Lenin and the Market Economy." It is an honor for me to be here again.

Before going on to the main topic, I want to note a technical term. The Japanese Communist Party uses the term "scientific socialism" to describe its theory. It is the term with the same meaning of "Marxism," which you use. The JCP does not reject it. Today I'd like to use the common term.

When the old regimes of the Soviet Union and East European countries collapsed in 1989 - 1990, opinions that "socialism had failed" or "Marxism had gone bankrupt" prevailed in the West. Was there any truth to those views?

The first important point is that what collapsed was neither socialism nor Marxism. The core of Marx's idea of socialism is that in the economic sphere, producers are the genuine masters of production, society will develop to become a community of free human beings, and international relations will be governed by the supreme principles of peace, national

self-determination, and “rules of morals and justice.”

In the light of these points, what kind of society was the former Soviet Union? During the days of Lenin, the Soviet Union was on the road toward socialist development by trial and error. However, after Stalin took the power, it had deviated off the road. Domestically, it imposed domination by despotism and bureaucratism, and internationally, it took the path of hegemonism through invasions, interventions, and the oppressions of other countries. Thus the Soviet Union degenerated into a society of repression discarding the principles of socialism. The leading idea there was self-righteous dogmatism of unconditionally defending under the name of “socialism” a deteriorated system.

There were triumphant shouts by the West calling the collapse of the Soviet Union as the “collapse of socialism” and the “failure of Marxism.” But they were wrong.

When the Soviet Union was dissolved, the JCP published a statement welcoming the end of a colossal historical evil against progress of society. Developments in the situation of the world since then has proved our assessment was correct.

Another point I want to stress is that the wave of collapse was limited to the Soviet Union and the Eastern European countries. During the past 15 years, China, Vietnam, and Cuba have further established independent policies aiming for socialism and have achieved major developments. These countries are carrying a greater weight in international economic and political affairs, and this trend will be accelerated further in the 21st century.

The realities of the world provide concrete evidence against the song of triumph by the West saying that “socialism has collapsed.”

Then, what position does Marxism occupy in the present day world? This is what I want to talk about today.

Marxist conception of nature and modern natural science

Marxism, above all else, is a world-view. Its position in the world depends on whether Marxism can correctly view the world we live in: nature and society.

Let me examine the issue of its view of nature. The first characteristics of Marxism is its materialistic and dialectical conception of nature.

Marx and Engels worked in an era of the rapid development of natural science. In the 1880s, Engels said that “natural science has now advanced so far that it can no longer escape dialectical generalization”.¹ He also pointed out that the development of natural science is inextricably combined with materialism and dialectics, saying, “With each epoch-making discovery even in the sphere of natural science, it [materialism] has to change its form”.²

The development of natural science today outstrips that during the era of Marx and Engels, both in scale and speed. All fields of natural science, including elementary particle physics theory and the theory of the creation of the universe more than 10 billion years ago, have proved more than ever that the theoretical use of materialism and dialectics to be correct.

Let me look at some questions of materialism.

In the days of Marx and Engels, although the development of natural science in various fields proved the materialistic view to be correct, there was less scientific elucidation of life, consciousness and thinking. This field was the bastion of idealists in those days. Marx and Engels, however, aggressively presented materialist views on these questions to which natural science had not yet given clear answers.

What is life? “Life is the mode of existence of albuminous bodies”.³
What is consciousness? “Consciousness and thinking ... are the product of

¹ Preface to the second edition of *Anti-Dühring*, Marx/Engels Collected Works, vol. 25, p.14)

² *Ludwig Feuerbach and End of Classical German Philosophy*, MECW vol. 26, p.369

³ *Anti-Dühring*, MECW vol. 25, p.76

a material, bodily organ, the brain... the mind itself is merely the highest product of matter".⁴ Among natural scientists in those days, such a bold conception of life or human consciousness was a minority opinion.

One and half century have passed since then. We can safely say that developments of natural science have followed the line laid down by Marx and Engels.

It has been found that, in all living things, proteins are built from nucleic acids. One of them is deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) which contains the genetic instructions specifying the biological development of all forms of life. The materialistic nature of life has been unraveled. It is said among scientists that there lies the fundamental principle of bioscience.

How about human consciousness? Natural science has made it clear that the brain of humans is composed of a network of 14 billion neurons which support all mental activities. Today's natural science has achieved many results through aggressive challenges to map out how human senses and thinking are corresponding to what parts of neurons.

In these ways, the correctness of a Marxist materialistic view of nature has been proved to be true by developments in natural science. It can be said that the idealistic view of nature has been losing their last grounds in the area of life and consciousness.

Theses of historical materialism is common sense

Let me refer to the view of society and the Marxist position of historical materialism.

When Marx advocated this theory one hundred and sixty years ago, it was first regarded as a curious conception. But it can be said that many theses of his historical materialism have now become common sense.

Let me examine some basic points of the materialist conception of history.

⁴ *Ludwig Feuerbach and End of Classical German Philosophy*, MECW vol. 26, p.369

Historical materialism seeks the foundation of the development of society in the economic structure and its movements. This thesis was a totally new viewpoint 160 years ago. But now, there are hardly any people who see the world only from a political or cultural perspective.

There is another thesis: complicated social relations are based on the actions of human groups, or classes. This is also common sense now. There cannot be a thorough study of social or political affairs of a capitalist country unless the actual conditions of big business and the conditions of workers and farmers are carefully observed.

There is also a thesis that the history of society is the history of the transition from one type of society to another, corresponding to changes in the economic system. Types of society include classless primitive society, slave society, feudal society, capitalist society, and socialist society. All countries do not pass all these stages in this order. But characteristic of Marxist social outlook is this historical perspective -- stages of social development are distinguished by the economy. Undoubtedly, this viewpoint is now accepted more widely in the historical sciences.

These theses were raised by Marx as historical materialism. Now many people accept them as a matter of fact though they are not aware of their Marxist origins. This is another endorsement that the Marxist social outlook has been proven to be correct through the history.

Who can analyze the changing world?

But opponents of Marxism may say, "Although historical materialism may have been successful in explaining the past, it failed in dealing with the modern world and Marx's prediction that capitalism would end failed. Far from ending, capitalism has made amazing developments, hasn't it?"

I must ask these critics if they believe that the contemporary world really promises a bright future of capitalism?

Let me review the world's changes in the 20th century. Capitalism

dominated the world at the beginning of the 20th century. Highly developed capitalist countries, whose population was 550 million, or one third of the world's total population of 1.65 billion, ruled the whole world by keeping the remaining 1.1 billion people under their control in colonies or dependencies.

However, in the course of the 20th century the situation has drastically changed. First, countries aiming to build a socialist society emerged and the two different systems are coexisting. Second, the colonial system collapsed and this led to the birth of a new international order opposing colonial rule. I think that these two major changes transformed the world into four groups, each with different socio-economic characters.

Of the world's 6.2 billion population, the group of developed capitalist countries have about 0.9 billion; the group of countries questing for socialism 1.4 billion; the group of countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America that achieved political independence and sovereignty about 3.5 billion; plus the group of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe have about 0.4 billion. This is the present world map. In the beginning of the 20th century, developed capitalist countries dominated the world's population, but today they rule just one seventh of the total population.

In view of this change, is it possible to say that today's world promises a bright future for capitalism?

In addition, I want to stress that no economic theory other than Marxism can effectively analyze this global change.

The biggest defect of bourgeois economists of any color, Marx repeatedly pointed out, is that they are attempting to convince themselves that the principles peculiar to capitalism are absolute and eternal principles of human society, without even considering alternatives to capitalism. This Marxist criticism could be applied to contemporary Western economists. They cannot understand that the capitalist mode of production is a specifically historical one that emerged and developed at a specific period in human history. They are accordingly unable to understand the series of social systems preceding capitalism and higher forms of society that will

replace capitalism.

In terms of socio-economics, the contemporary world is composed of countries comprising a wide range of characteristics. How can economists with a narrow perspective based on nothing but the capitalist point of view offer a coherent analysis of possibilities?

Your Chinese economy, for example, is characterized as a market economy based on a political system aiming at socialism. It not only shares much with the ordinary capitalist market economy, but also has a logic and principles different from the capitalist market economy. But this system with different logics and principles cannot be understood by Western economists who know little about systems other than capitalism.

I've just mentioned that Marx's social outlook is characterized by his historical sense regarding the development of human society, which could also be equally referred to as Marxist economics. That is why this economics can understand a diversified world and find logics and laws of the market economy questing for socialism. In this sense, I want to emphasize that one of the tasks for Marxism today is to help develop an economic analysis of socio-economies other than that of capitalism.

(2) How to Envisage the World in the 21st Century

The 21st century is the time to question whether the capitalist system will continue or not

Next, I want to make some points about how we look at the world in the 21st century from a Marxist viewpoint.

We think that the 21st century will be an era when the question whether to allow the capitalist system to continue will come up on the agenda in many parts of the world.

Our view is based mainly on the seriousness of the contradictions that contemporary capitalism faces.

Marx made a thorough analysis of the capitalist mode of production and revealed that this economic system is operated on capital's quest for profit as "its leading motive and the goal that attracts it," and that this profit-first principle is the source of all contradictions of capitalism. This criticism of capitalism made by Marx is applicable not only to the 19th century-world in which he lived but also to the contemporary capitalism in the 21st century.

In Marx's time, the periodic occurrences of depressions and recessions and the widening social gap between the rich and the poor received much attention. Today, these contradictions continue unabated. An additional point requiring attention in analyzing the contemporary capitalism is that these contradictions have appeared in new forms that can endanger the survival of the capitalist system itself. Let me take the following two issues as examples:

(1) One is the question of the future for the peoples in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. More than a half century has passed since the colonial system completely collapsed, but capitalism has failed to provide a majority of their former colonies with conditions for self-reliant economic development. Disappointment at this failure has caused the past decades to be called the "lost decades". But now, half century has been lost.

In a broader aspect, the difficulties that these countries have were caused by the inroads of capitalism into these regions. Capitalist inroads on a large scale began in the 16th century. Up to that time, every region in the world was taking a path of social and cultural development on its own. This path was cut off by the capitalist incursions, and countries in these regions were taken into colonial rule and that has resulted in the present situation. If the capitalist world, which has the historical responsibility for this outcome, cannot provide these countries with the conditions for a new and self-reliant economic development after they become politically independent, this means that the capitalist mode of production is not qualified to be the dominant global economic system.

(2) The other is the question of the global environment. Undertaking efforts to curb global warming are now a major political and economic task in the world. This question reveals a serious crisis of the very survival of the capitalist system.

The greenhouse effect, in which the composition of the earth's atmosphere is rapidly changing with an increase in carbon dioxide, if left unchecked, will turn the earth into a planet inhabitable for humankind. The percentage of carbon dioxide in the earth's atmosphere is 0.01 percent, and the figure has remained unchanged for the past 400 million years. Because of the unrestricted capitalist economic activities urged by the principle of pursuing profits, this figure began to vary in the last several decades.

When the earth came into being 4.6 billion years ago, almost all the earth's atmosphere was made up of carbon dioxide, making the earth's surface impossible to sustain life. This was why the first form of life that was born 3.5 billion years ago was in the sea. Photosynthetic operations replaced carbon dioxide with oxygen, and the accumulated effects for over 3 billion years changed the atmosphere into its present composition, and just 400 million years ago it became possible for the earth to support life on the land. The atmosphere, once inhospitable to life on earth, changed its role into one of protecting life. In this respect, we call the atmosphere the earth's "life-support system."

This "life-support system" which came into existence during the initial periods of the earth's history of 3.5 billion years and functioned well in the ensuing 400 million years is about to be destroyed due to economic activities based on the principle of pursuing unlimited profits. If capitalism has no power to resolve this problem, human society cannot but reach the conclusion that capitalism is no longer capable of existing on the earth. In this context, the question of the global environment requires humankind to make a decisive choice regarding this issue which is much more serious than mere economic depressions.

In these present circumstances surrounding capitalism, we find the strongest reason for us to think that this century will be one for social

systems to change dramatically.

Viewing the world from social system change

The possibility of social systems to change is not limited to particular parts of the world. In the beginning of this speech I classified the world's countries into four groups based on their socio-economic characteristics, and the possibility for social systems to change is common to all of them.

(1) In the developed capitalist countries, contradictions of the profit-first principle appear more directly than in the other groups. In my opinion, however, the process in which calls for social system change to mature into actual tasks will take time and involve many complexities and that, in every country, an independent effort to seek an approach to a path toward social system change is required.

We in Japan have a strategic policy of a phased change: democratic revolution and then socialist revolution. The democratic revolution referred to here has a character different from the old type of democratic revolution of overcoming feudalistic rule. This revolution is a new type of democratic revolution with the following two major tasks: (1) putting an end to the state subordination to the United States into which Japan after WW II fell and recover genuine national sovereignty and independence, and (2) achieving democratic reforms ending the arbitrary control by large corporations and financial circles which is an aberration even in the capitalist world. This is the policy that the JCP has proposed as an independent strategic policy to meet the present situation and we are striving to achieve this.

(2) The second group covers countries in Asia, Africa, and Latin America where a majority of the world population lives. These countries are diverse in forms and levels of economic, political, and cultural development, but have in common the tasks of strengthening their national independence, improving their economies, and eliminating poverty. Their insistence on rejecting any hegemony by foreign powers has now become a principle common to all of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.

Though it is not easy to make a general statement about the prospects for the future, we set importance on the possibility that some countries might seek paths to socialist reforms without taking capitalist paths in their national efforts to strengthen national independence and achieve democratic goals.

This way of progressing into a new social form by skipping the advanced capitalist road for a country with a weak capitalist system was one presumed by Marx and Engels in their early years and what the revolutions in China, Vietnam, and Cuba have been practicing.

(3) In the revolutions in the 21st century, the policy of carrying out revolutions by getting a majority support in elections will become more important than ever.

In this context, we attach great importance to the changes in the situation in Latin America. In the past, this continent was referred to as one where no revolution is possible except by armed guerrilla struggle. This policy was called the Guevarist path after its advocate Che Guevara. Since the late 1990s, the establishment of leftist governments in Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and Bolivia was based on obtaining a majority support in elections.

Particularly Venezuela, which leads this movement, firmly promoted social revolution by undergoing at least eight judgments by the people in the last eight years, beginning from the victory in the 1998 presidential election and overcoming through political struggles the subsequent two anti-revolutionary coups, a military coup-d'etat and an "oil coup". I think this is a major accomplishment.

Marx and Engels thought that revolution by the winning parliamentary majority was possible in the 19th century in countries in which the system of people's sovereignty was established, and they worked to achieve this aim. In their time, there were a few countries in Europe that had the political system of people's sovereignty. In the 20th century, a major change took place, and democracy based on people's sovereignty is now the mainstream in the world. Behind the increasing significance of the

policy of revolution by obtaining a parliamentary majority lies this change in world politics.

New stage of co-existence and competition between two social systems

The last point I want to make that is an important characteristic of the 21st century, an era of worldwide social system changes, is that the coexistence and competition between two social systems, that is, between capitalist countries and countries questing for socialism, is entering a new stage.

A while ago I said that the 21st century will put the capitalist system to the test regarding its capability to respond to the urgent tasks facing humankind, including the issue of the global environment. The capitalist system is not the only one to be tested for its capability to respond to such tasks. The emerging countries aiming at socialism will also be tested for how they respond to these tasks to determine whether a socialist system is an effective social system to replace capitalism or not. I think this to be a new and important feature of the current century.

In the past, there was a period when coexistence and competition between two social systems referred above all to rivalry in economic growth. This is still an important issue today, and the Japanese media reports on international comparisons of gross domestic product (GDP) as an index of the size of economies, with comments that China outdid this or that capitalist country or when China is likely to outdo Japan.

A major problem today, however, is whether societies of humankind can survive and be sustained by the environment. There is more to competition than just economic rivalry, and the two systems are now evaluated which system is superior in ability to respond effectively to pressing social and environmental tasks facing humanity.

It so happened that this thought of mine was confirmed when I read the British newspaper Guardian report on the world conference on poverty reduction held in Shanghai in 2004. The conference was jointly held by the

Chinese government and the World Bank, the main theme of which was how to promote activities to remove abject poverty from the world. The British paper Guardian enthusiastically covered the conference, and its article on the first day session began as follows: “China offered the world a lesson in how to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty yesterday at an international conference which underlined its emergence as a powerful alternative to the western model of development. The article gave the following data to endorse this statement. “The number of Chinese people subsisting on less than one dollar a day has fallen from 490 million in 1981 to 88 million. ... China has accounted for three-quarters of all the people in the world lifted out of abject poverty.” The article further quoted the World Bank president’s praise, “There is something here we need to learn about ... ways to reduce poverty.”

When I read this article, I got the impression that the competing two social systems at this stage are clearly revealing themselves in ways that neither sponsor had ever anticipated.

We know that China is making great efforts to resolve a series of contradictions that were brought about during the process of rapid economic development, including the need to reduce social gaps, protect the environment, and resolve the urban-rural contradiction. I want to add that China’s success in these efforts would have a great international significance by winning the competition between the two social systems, in addition to its national significance.

Many of global tasks in economic arenas cannot be fundamentally resolved unless humanity finds ways to rationally control economic activities. The environmental question, including the greenhouse effect and the increasing scarcity of natural resources, are typical examples.

Saying that three critical factors threatening the sustainability of the earth and humanity should be found in environmental pollution, resource shortages, and increasing wastes, a Japanese researcher has made specific proposals for the earth’s survival. Though the proposals are rational, it is necessary for us to consider social control of economic activities when we put these proposals into practice in earnest. In this regard, I have perceived

a clear connection between the current global tasks and the choice of social systems.

In comparing capitalist society with a communist society to come in the future, Marx in his “Capital” gave an analysis that in capitalist society “social reason” always asserts itself only *post festum*, that is, only after everything has failed, but in a communist society social reason operates in advance of a failure to prevent a catastrophe. This statement is made in the context of discussing the issue of economic depression. We are now in an era that keenly requires “social reason” to operate a priori concerning the issue of the earth’s and humanity’s survival and sustainability, a broader and more serious issue than that of economic depression .

Before ending my speech, I want to express my wish that China achieve great success in its nation-building with a grand perspective by giving full play to its advantage as a country seeking socialism and that it will encourage developments of the world in the 21st century. Thank you for listening.

-- Akahata, May 30, 2006