

Interview

On Pope Francis's recent Encyclical Laudati Si'; Bloch; ecosocialism and left unity in Europe today

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Michael Löwy discusses Pope Francis's recent Encyclical Laudati Si', ecosocialism and left unity in Europe today

February 19, 2016 — *Links International Journal of Socialist Renewal* — Michael Löwy is a militant of the French section of the Fourth International. His wide-ranging interests include, in part, the connection between the Romantic movement and Marxism, ecosocialism, Liberation Theology and questions of art and culture.

His many publications (in various languages) include *The Marxism of Che Guevara*, *Georg Lukács: from Romanticism to Bolshevism*, *The war of gods: Religion and Politics in Latin America*, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the national question* and *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*.

This interview was conducted by Barry Healy via the internet in February, 2016.

Barry Healy - You have written that Pope Francis' Laudato Si is of "world historic importance".

Why do you see this encyclical as different from previous Vatican documents and what significance do you see it having for Catholics in particular? What are the Encyclical's strengths and weaknesses?

Michael Löwy - Pope Francis' "Ecological Encyclical" is an event, which from a religious, ethical, social and political point of view is indeed of planetary importance. Previous Vatican documents either ignored the issue, or limited themselves to vague considerations on the need to "protect God's Creation".

Considering the enormous influence of the Catholic Church worldwide, *Laudato Si* is a crucial contribution towards the development of a critical ecological conscience. It was received with enthusiasm by the true defenders of the environment. However it aroused uneasiness and rejection among religious conservatives, representatives of capital, and ideologues of "market ecology."

It is a document with a great richness and complexity, one that proposes a new interpretation of the

Judeo-Christian tradition, a rupture with the “promethean dream of dominion over the world”, and a profoundly radical reflection on the causes of the ecological crisis. Many aspects of Liberation Theology, particularly that of eco-theologian Leonardo Boff, can be seen as a source of inspiration here, an example being the inseparable association of the “cry of the earth” and the “cry of the poor”.

The reason why the Encyclical met such a resistance from market-oriented media is its anti-systemic character. For Pope Francis, ecological disasters and climate change are not merely the results of individual behaviour, but rather the result of the current models of production and consumption.

Bergoglio is not a Marxist and the word “capitalism” does not appear at all in the Encyclical. But it is very clear that, for him, the dramatic ecological problems of our age are a result of “the machinery of the current globalized economy,” a machinery that constitutes a global system, “*a system of commercial relations and ownership which is structurally perverse*” [emphasis added by ML].

The main weakness of *Laudato Si* is that it lacks a clear radical alternative to the system he so clearly denounces. This is the contribution of ecosocialism.

Do you have an appraisal of Pope Francis’ politics? Have you any thoughts about the struggles that his papacy has ignited within the Catholic Church?

At the beginning, I did not expect much from Bergoglio. His past activity in Argentina did not seem to be particularly innovative or critical.

But I have been pleasantly surprised by his politics: an opening towards Liberation Theology, the homage to Monsignor Oscar Romero [the Archbishop of San Salvador murdered by a government death squad in 1980], the courageous denunciation of the Italian government’s policy towards refugees, the meeting with social movements in Cochabamba, and now the *Encyclical Laudato Si*.

Of course, there are other areas where progress has been slow or non-existent, for example women’s right to dispose of their bodies (divorce, contraception, abortion)!

Is Liberation Theology still a significant trend of thought in Christian circles? Are there elements of Liberation Theology that still have political importance in Latin America or other regions of the world?

In spite of the repression by John Paul II and Ratzinger, Liberation Theology remained influential in Latin America and particularly in Brazil. It will probably be reinforced now that the Vatican has adopted a more friendly attitude, for instance inviting Gustavo Gutierrez [one of the main founders of Liberation Theology] to the Vatican.

Pope Francis has strong connections to the non-Marxist wing of Liberation Theology, represented for instance by the Argentine “populist” theologian Juan Carlos Scannone, often quoted in his Encyclicals. There are some Catholic circles sympathetic to Liberation Theology in Asia (Philippines, South Korea), the US and Europe, but it has developed mainly in Latin America.

Many writers refer to the writings of Ernst Bloch as a sort of ‘warm stream’ in Marxism. You wrote about Bloch in *Georg Lukacs - From Romanticism to Bolshevism*. You thought then (1976) that his writing was “mysterious and sibylline”, an “alchemist’s combination”. What is your opinion of Bloch now? Do you regard his thinking of use to Marxists?

Ernst Bloch is one of the most interesting representatives of a romantic revolutionary current in 20th century Marxism.

Bloch defined as the warm stream in Marxism the utopian dimension, the “Principle Hope”, the Romantic impulse, the “landscapes of desire”.

But to define Marxism as utopia does not mean, for Bloch, to deny its scientific character: it cannot play its revolutionary role without the contribution of the cold stream of science. Marxism is an inseparable unity of sobriety and imagination, reason and hope, the rigor of the detective and the enthusiasm of the dreamer. For him, the cold and warm currents of Marxism must merge - both are indispensable even if there is a clear hierarchy between them: the cold current is at the service of the warm current.

As with other revolutionary romantics, Ernst Bloch has a keen interest in religion. Of all the forms of anticipatory consciousness, religion occupies a privileged place because it constitutes for him the utopia par excellence.

It is nevertheless clear that the religion which Bloch subscribes to is - to use one of his favourite paradoxes - an atheistic religion. It is a Kingdom of God without God, which replaces the Lord of the World with a “mystical democracy”.

His aim is to overcome religious transcendence, and bring down to earth, to immanence, the contents of desire of religion. These are treasures which include under the most diverse forms the idea of communism: from the primitive communism of the Bible (remembering nomadic communities) to the monastic communism of Joachim de Flore and the chiliastic communism of millenarian heresies (Albigensian, Hussites, Taborites, Anabaptists).

Understandably, Liberation Theologians were very much interested in Ernst Bloch's writings: he is the most often quoted Marxist author in Gustavo Gutierrez's pioneering work, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (1971).

In the past you have written about the need for Marxists and Anarchists to work more closely together. You have pointed to the period of the First International, when Marx and Bakunin were part of the same organisation.

On what basis do you think that such united work could occur? Short-term united fronts or more long-term organisational agreements?

What effects did the defeat of the Paris Commune have on the workers movement in France? Before the Commune, were Anarchists characterised by ultra-left, individualistic forms of terror?

Let us start with some history.

Before the Commune, Anarchists, that is, followers of Proudhon and Bakunin, participated in the activities of the First International, and on several occasions, in 1868-69, joined with Marx and his followers to approve a collectivistic orientation for the movement. During the Commune, both tendencies worked together in promoting the first proletarian democratic power in history.

After the defeat of the Commune, a terrible repression followed with tens of thousands being killed. The labour movement in France was weakened for many years, and the First International underwent a split (Marx versus Bakunin) and soon disappeared.

For a short period, at the beginning of the 20th century, some French Anarchists (Ravachol and his friends) practiced individual forms of violence - the term “terrorism” would be misleading - usually aiming at representatives of the power (Kings, Presidents, the National Assembly) but sometimes at

supposedly “bourgeois” targets (restaurants, etc). This was a short lived experience, and in any case, the vast majority of the Anarchist movement was engaged in building a large Union, the CGT (Confédération Générale du Travail) with an anarcho-syndicalist orientation.

In the small booklet which I wrote with my friend Olivier Besancenot, *Affinités Révolutionnaires* (Paris, Fayard, 2015) we tried to show that throughout the history of the labour movement, from the Paris Commune to May '68, including the Spanish Revolution of 1936-37, Anarchists and non-Stalinist Marxists were able to cooperate and fight together. We also discuss the main disagreements between both currents, showing that there is a large common basis.

Our aim is not immediately a tactical or strategic organisational agreement, but to promote dialogue, mutual understanding, as well as overcoming traditional mistrust and hostility.

You have referred to Stalinism having “productivist tendencies”, that is, it disregarded or downplayed ecological constraints on production.

Can it be said that Stalinism rehabilitated the positivism that had infected the Second International?

In an ecosocialist future you have said that production would be based on use values not exchange values. Given that socialism has always been posited as a society of plenty, how can we ensure that the amount of use values produced will be enough to satisfy human desires without harming ecological sustainability?

Yes, Stalinism, next to being a bureaucratic dictatorship, perverted Marxism into a positivistic state ideology, and developed the economy by copying Western productivistic methods and technology, with disastrous ecological consequences. Chernobyl is only the most obvious example of this productivistic dead end.

Socialism aims at a society of plenty, but it's definition of “plenty” is not the same as the capitalist one!

Plenty for Marx meant not a limitless quantitative accumulation of commodities, but the qualitative satisfaction of the essential social needs. Being, the realisation of free human life, was for him more important than having, possessing more and more goods. This is why he sees the reduction of labour time as the beginning of the Kingdom of Freedom.

If one produces use-values instead of commodities for profit, immediately a large amount of goods disappear as useless. For instance advertisements!

It would also mean an end to inbuilt obsolescence, which has forced consumers to buy new commodities in a short time. Goods will be made so that they last longer and made so that they can be repaired. The end of advertising, inbuilt obsolescence, military industry, etc, would create the conditions for a much smaller amount of products to be manufactured, in a way compatible with the environmental limits.

Which goods are really necessary and should be produced is a decision which belongs to the people themselves, after a process of democratic discussion, leading to forms of democratic ecosocialist planning.

What are your thoughts and feelings about the “broad left party” question after the Syriza experience?

There are Marxists now who are denouncing the project altogether. Is the European situation now so

perilous that attempts at left unity are no longer viable?

What is the political content of the “left primary” campaign that Liberation has pushed?

My conclusion from the Syriza experience is not that Syriza was a mistake, but that the deeply antidemocratic structure of the European Union makes it very difficult for an isolated leftist government in a small country to implement its program.

Precisely because the situation is so perilous in Europe - economic crisis, lack of democracy, spectacular rise of racist, far-right parties - left unity is necessary and urgent. In each country it will take different forms. Parties such as the Left Bloc in Portugal, Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Die Linke in Germany, the Labour Party with Jeremy Corbyn in the UK are some of the most relevant examples.

There is no unique recipe, one has to find, in each country, the way to build left unity and move forward, against racism, “austerity”, neoliberal policies, ecological destruction, and, in the last analysis, against the root of the evil - the capitalist system.

The “left primary” campaign in France seems to me a rather confused initiative, not really able to overcome the divisions among the “left of the left”. A more interesting proposal has been suggested by Olivier Besancenot: a large General Assembly of Social and Ecological movements, which would discuss a common platform and eventually a candidate representing the movements, which could then be supported by the various leftist parties.

For the moment, unfortunately, the radical left in France is in disarray, weakened, divided and without a clear perspective.

P.S.

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