

51. Socialism, communism and revolution

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From the development of his version of historical materialism in the 1840s to his death, Marx consistently referred to the society that would arise from the resolution of the contradictions of capitalism as communism. This can be understood in terms of the use of the terms communism and socialism in Europe in the 1840s. Even as Marx closely mirrored Feuerbach in his materialist rejection of Hegel's idealism, he sharply, and crucially for his theory of history, went on to reject Feuerbach's materialism (and all other previous materialisms) because 'the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively' (*Theses on Feuerbach*). It was from his interaction with the French communist secret societies (and their German émigré reflection, the League of the Just) that Marx discovered the concept of worker self-emancipation, and with that the broader philosophy of praxis that is such an essential element of Marxism. Engels emphasized this in 1890 when explaining why they had called their 1847 work the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*:

Socialism in 1847 signified a bourgeois movement, communism a working-class movement . . . And since we were very decidedly of the opinion as early as then that 'the emancipation of the workers must be the task of the working class itself,' [from the *General Rules of the International*] we could have no hesitation as to which of the two names we should choose. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party (MCP)*, Preface, 1890 edition)

By the 1870s the usage of these terms by Marxists changed, but they continued to be concerned with the same issue Marx expressed 30 years earlier in his famous comment to Ruge: 'we do not dogmatically anticipate the world, but only want to find the new world through criticism of the old one'. Socialism whose 'historical action' was to come from the ideas of some advocate was referred to as 'utopian', while socialism whose historical action was to arise from the struggles of the working class in its own self-interest was referred to as 'scientific'. Marxists at the time used the terms scientific socialism and communism as synonyms and, while Marx himself generally described the system likely to arise out of capitalism as communism, he too occasionally used the term scientific socialism as a full synonym.

For Marx and his co-thinkers, not only were all social structures in a constant state of change but, in particular, the change from one mode of production to another had to be understood as a transformation that could only occur over time. In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx (1875, ch. 1) referred to two phases in the development of a post-capitalist communist society. Concerning the first phase, he wrote: 'What we have to deal with here is a communist society, not as it has *developed* on its own foundations, but,

on the contrary, just as it *emerges* from capitalist society; which is thus in every respect, economically, morally, and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges'. In this first phase of a 'co-operative society based on common ownership of the means of production' the key characteristic for Marx was that 'individual labor no longer exists in an indirect fashion but directly as a component part of total labor' under a conscious collective plan. Then 'the individual producer receives back from society – after the deductions have been made – exactly what he gives to it . . . The same amount of labor which he has given to society in one form, he receives back in another.' Marx argued that this 'defect' of the dependence of the organization of work on the exchange of equivalents, a bourgeois principle of right, is 'inevitable in the first phase of communist society'. And it was only by transcending this with a principle of distribution according to need that one could establish a communist society that rested on its own foundations, a communist mode of production, a second and higher phase of communism. 'In a higher phase of communist society . . . only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!'

While the final transformation of the usage of the words socialism and communism to that used by most (not all) Marxists today is often ascribed to Lenin, this change was widespread among Marxists and non-Marxist Social Democrats at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lenin went to great lengths to point out that Marx himself did not use the terms that way, but that this was nevertheless their current usage. Socialism became identified with Marx's first phase of communism, and 'full communism' or simply communism with his higher phase of communism.

For Marx, socialism as a phase in the process of the transition from capitalism to full communism would be characterized by the elimination of many of the negative characteristics of capitalism. That capitalist production decisions are made by individual capitals, are directed toward capital accumulation and are coordinated by markets results in two particularly important restrictions on human development. The first is a socially inefficient application of human labour to the transformation of nature. The second is the restriction of workers to being objects of the social process instead of its subjects. And this economic system is enforced through the political rule of the capitalist class. Hence, as seen above, Marx considered as one negation of capitalism that with socialism the means of production would be owned collectively by the producers themselves, thus ending the capitalist system of production decisions and labour allocation. These would now occur according to a plan of conscious cooperation generated by the entire society, acting as a single entity serving its own collective interests. Politically this socialist economic system would be enforced through the democratic rule of the majority, the working class.

Similarly, full communism would be characterized again by a 'criticism of the old', the elimination of further barriers to authentic human development that still existed under socialism. Above all this would involve a change in both the nature of the work by which humans reproduce their conditions of existence, and how they understand their collective and individual need for work. Work time would be further cut as the forces of production increased and 'all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly'. Work would no longer stunt human development through the 'subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and . . . also the antithesis between mental and physical labor'. Note

that this does not mean an end to the division of labour. Most crucially, work would no longer be 'external forced labour'. But for Marx to complete the change in the nature of work to 'really free work' required more than the negative removal of external imposition, it required that work assume a character that could develop the worker's individual and species human potential, and thereby become something that 'has become not only a means of life but life's prime want'.

REVOLUTION

'Between capitalist and communist society there lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other' (*Critique of the Gotha Program*, ch. 4). Marx's theory of revolution concerns the how and why of that transformation. The Marxist theory of revolution can be formulated in two ways, as the resolution of the conflict between forces and relations of production, and as the pursuit of human development. The two formulations are not incompatible, and both are repeatedly presented in Marx's work. Either by itself, however, through its emphasis on one aspect of the nature of revolution, is subject to being interpreted in a partial and one-sided way that would be incorrect. For Marx the two formulations are two different aspects of a single theory of revolution.

Revolution as Resolution of the Conflict Between Forces and Relations of Production

Already in 1847 Marx and Engels wrote of how both the conflict between the constantly more powerful forces of production and the relations of production had led to the bourgeois revolution that overthrew feudalism, and the same type of conflict was then unfolding which would lead to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism:

At a certain stage in the development of these means of production and of exchange, the conditions under which feudal society produced and exchanged, the feudal organisation of agriculture and manufacturing industry, in one word, the feudal relations of property became no longer compatible with the already developed productive forces; they became so many fetters. They had to be burst asunder; they were burst asunder . . . A similar movement is going on before our own eyes . . . For many a decade past the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeois and of its rule . . . The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property . . . [T]he bourgeoisie [has] forged the weapons that bring death to itself. (*MCP*, ch. 1)

The importance of this formulation lies in its emphasis on the contradictions in the current economic, political and social order as the root cause of the revolution and the new future that it engenders. This gives rise to Marx's position indicated above that we can see the general shape of the future (but not the details, due to the importance of historical contingency) by studying the present conflicts and considering likely forms of

their resolution. It is also the source of Marx's many famous 'laws of motion of society', again understood as tendential and not mechanically determined outcomes. This position is presented in opposition to the approach of the 'utopian socialists', that a better future will come from the desirable ideas of the minds of social reformers.

The weakness of this formulation, when taken by itself, is its openness to a one-sided interpretation that ignores or greatly underemphasizes the role of humans (in particular, the working class) as the necessary active agents to resolve these contradictions. We saw above that this was at the heart of Marx's break with (or transcendence of) Feuerbach's philosophy. Here care must be taken not to settle for attacking a straw man, in order to understand the depth of what this involved for Marx's theory of revolution. Feuerbach of course knew that social contradictions do not resolve themselves without human agency. But for him the proletariat would exercise a 'passive practice', directed by (German) philosophy. By 1845 Marx and Engels (for example, *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*) moved to replace this weaker idea of human agency in the revolution with the concept of a much more 'active practice' and stronger agency, that of 'self-activity' or 'revolutionary praxis'.

Revolution as Pursuit of Human Development

From their earliest writings Marx and Engels saw socialism/communism, and hence the revolutionary process that would give rise to it, as the result of the human vocation for self-development. Most often this was stated negatively, in terms of the limitations that capitalist society and its relations of production placed on authentic human development. Marx wrote extensively on this, especially in terms of alienation, well before he immersed himself in his detailed studies of how capitalism functioned. Both Marx and Engels maintained this view throughout their lives. Occasionally they stated so positively and directly. Consider the following two from among the many references to this formulation of socialism/communism as the removal of capitalism's barriers to 'the development of all human powers' or 'what is truly human'. From Marx's early work:

If man draws all his knowledge, sensation, etc., from the world of the senses and the experience gained in it, then what has to be done is to arrange the empirical world in such a way that man experiences and becomes accustomed to what is truly human in it and that he becomes aware of himself as a man. If correctly understood interest is the principal of all morality, man's private interest must be made to coincide with the interest of humanity. (*The Holy Family*)

And from Marx's later work:

In fact, however, when the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces etc. . . . The absolute working-out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development, which makes this totality of development, i.e. *the development of all human powers as such the end in itself*. (*Grundrisse*, Notebook IV, emphasis added)

This presentation of Marx's theory of revolution, less common than the former presentation during the twentieth century, has attracted growing attention today as a complement to that position, particularly as a current in the discussion of 'Socialism of the 21st

Century'. Two works that present this formulation of Marx's theory of revolution at greater length are Draper (1977) and Löwy (2005).

The importance of this formulation lies in its addressing Marx's concern with Feuerbach by placing human self-activity at the centre of his theory of revolution, as Marx held was necessary. It makes clear an aspect of Marx's revolutionary worldview too often downplayed or ignored by some advocates of scientific socialism, what Fromm (1961, p. vi) referred to as Marx's 'faith in man, in his capacity to liberate himself, and to realize his potentialities'. If this latter is not possible, then the Marxist political project itself becomes utopian. When understood as a complement to Marx's theory of revolution as the resolution of the conflict between the forces and relations of production, it precludes a politically sterile theory of revolution that counterposes a focus on the laws of motion of capitalism to a focus on the human actors who must effect all changes.

The weakness of this formulation, when taken by itself, is its openness to voluntarism, an incorrect understanding of the potential for (revolutionary) change that downplays or ignores the objective limitations imposed (again not mechanistically determined) by the environment that the protagonists are operating in. Attempts to effect revolutionary transformations that are inconsistent with the existing state of the contradictions in a particular capitalist formation can be much worse than ineffective. Such voluntarism can give rise to actions that retard the movement to remove the capitalist barriers in beginning the process of building a socialist/communist society.

CONCLUSION

Socialism/communism for Marx arose from, and was defined by, a resolution of the conflicts in capitalism, contradictions that limited the realization (and further development) of humanity's potential. This was understood to be a historically contingent and not mechanistically determined process. Among other negations of capitalism, socialism as the first phase of this process would be characterized by two essential transformations. The first is the economic liberation from the capitalist market system through its replacement by an economy run according to a democratically determined collective plan. The second is the political liberation from the rule of the capitalist class through the institution of working-class or popular democracy. Among other negations of socialism, full communism as the second phase of this process would be characterized by three essential transformations. The first is the reduction and humanization of work, including an end to the subordination of the individual to the divisions of labour (which does not mean an end to the division of labour) and with that the antithesis of manual and mental labour. The second is an accompanying change in the understanding of work from something negative that is externally imposed and which is merely necessary for physical survival, to something that develops humans as individuals and as a species. The third is the replacement of the old principal of right, the exchange of equivalents, by a new principal of right that yields distribution 'to each according to his needs'.

Marx's theory of revolution then concerns the how and why of the transformation from capitalism to this socialism/communism. Marx presented his theory of revolution in two complementary ways. On the one hand, this revolutionary transformation is the working out of the conflicts of the forces and relations of production in capitalism. On

the other hand, this revolutionary transformation results from the vocation of humans as individuals and as a species to achieve their potential. The former formulation stresses the objective basis for the revolutionary transformation and guards against a revolutionary voluntarism that could arise from the second formulation by itself. The second formulation stresses the necessary central role of self-activating humans in creating a better world, and guards against a mechanistic determinism that could arise from the first formulation by itself. Both of these presentations appear throughout Marx's work, and one can only understand Marx's theory of revolution as the simultaneous presentation of them both.