Chapter 1 The transition from capitalism to communism

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Against those who asserted the eternity of the state machine and those who made the first act of the revolution its ?abolition?, Marx and Engels argued that the proletariat could neither inaugurate a classless and stateless society at one blow nor use the existing state machine, but that:

?Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. Corresponding to this is also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat . . . The proletarian revolution therefore inaugurates a new epoch in human history ? the attempt to consciously construct a society which can ?inscribe on its banners: From each according his ability, to each according to his needs??2

The central task facing the proletariat in the transition period is to transform property relations, social life and political power so as to make possible the final consolidation of a communist society. In this period not only are the productive forces themselves to be massively expanded, not only are the social relations of production to be revolutionised but the proletariat as a class, and its proletarian state, will themselves wither away. This was one of the earliest insights of Marx and Engels, one from which they never wavered.

?The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonisms, and there will be no more political power properly so called, since ?political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism-in civil society?.3

And again:

?When the proletariat is victorious, it by no means becomes the absolute side of society, for it is victorious only by abolishing itself and its opposite. Then the proletariat disappears as well as the opposite which determines it, private property.? 4

The dictatorship of the proletariat is thus a temporary though indispensable, agency in the final eradication of capitalism and its social and economic laws. It is the means to the full realisation of the Marxist programme ? communism.

Politics in the transition period

The proletarian dictatorship has a double function. It must ensure the repression and destruction of the former ruling class and the defence of the workers state against internal and external counter-revolution. But it also inaugurates the construction of a planned economy which will allow the proletariat to progressively eradicate the laws of motion of capitalist economy and, on the basis of material abundance, replace all its repressive social norms and institutions. Marx and Engels were clear that the first prerequisite for the opening of the transition was the seizure of political power by the proletariat and the forcible retention of that power:
But before such a change can be accomplished it is necessary to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat, whose prime condition is a proletarian army. The working classes have to win the right to emancipation in the battlefield. 5

The purpose of the possession of state power – the organised power of one class for oppressing another – is to sweep away by force, the old conditions of production and thereby lay the basis for the abolition of its own supremacy as a class. The function of the proletarian dictatorship as the repressive agent against the bourgeoisie necessitates its dictatorial aspect. It is in Lenin’s terms unfettered by any law in its dealings with the bourgeoisie and their agents.

The attainment of communism via socialist construction imperatively demands the widest democracy for the toilers. To this end not only must the armed power of the bourgeoisie be taken from its hands but the whole military-bureaucratic machinery of the bourgeois state must be smashed and replaced with a state of a new type representing the power of the proletarians themselves.

Marx and Engels in their observations on the Paris Commune, Lenin and Trotsky in their concrete assessment of the Soviets of Workers and Soldiers’ Deputies in Russia, all isolated the distinct features of the state form the proletariat must construct if it is to organise itself to rule as a class. Most vitally, this state form must be based on: the abolition of the standing army and its replacement by a popular militia; and the recallability of all officials who shall be in receipt of no material privileges bar those of skilled workers. Lenin described the features of this semi-state thus:

The workers after winning political power, will smash the old bureaucratic apparatus, shatter it to its very foundations, and raze it to the ground; the working class will replace it by a new one, consisting of the very same workers and other employees, against whose transformation into bureaucrats the measures will at once be taken which were specified in detail by Marx and Engels: 1) Not only election, but also recall at any time; 2) pay I not to exceed that of a workman; 3) immediate introduction of control and supervision by all, so that all may become bureaucrats for a time and that therefore, nobody may be able to become a bureaucrat. 6

The building of a classless and stateless society cannot be victorious in one country or group of countries. So long as capitalism retains its essential grip on the world’s productive forces and its arsenal of destruction, the successful revolution of the proletariat, can only prove ultimately victorious through the world-wide defeat of the bourgeoisie. The transitional period therefore must also be a period of the internationalisation of the proletarian revolution.

**Economics in the transition period**

The immediate task of the proletarian state is to complete the political destruction of the bourgeoisie, to expropriate the capitalists and thus centralise the means of production in the hands of the state representing the toilers themselves. But the expropriation of the capital class does not of itself eradicate the operation of the laws or norms of capitalist production and distribution. The Marxist programme aims to replace the capitalist system of production with production planned consciously to meet human need. This, of necessity, will entail a period of transition within which the working class fights to eradicate the norms of capitalist production, distribution and exchange.

Marx and Engels presumed that in the early stages of the transition considerable remnants of capitalist society would remain in operation. 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 birth marks of the old society from whose womb it emerged?. 7

Marx presumed, for example, that in the initial stages of transition, remuneration for labour would take
place on the basis of a system whereby:

?The individual producer receives back from society ? after the deductions have been made exactly what he gives to it. The same amount of labour which he has given to society in one form he receives back in another?. 8

But he pointed out that such a system would necessarily involve the perpetuation of bourgeois right.

?But one man is superior to another physically or mentally, and so supplies more labour in the same time, or can labour for a longer time; and labour, to serve as a measure, must be defined by its duration or intensity, otherwise it ceases to be a standard of measurement?;9 ?it is, therefore, a right of inequality, in its content, like every right?.10

He goes on:

?But these defects are inevitable in the first phase of communist society as it is when it has just emerged after prolonged birth pangs from capitalist society. Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development conditioned thereby?.11

The economy in the transition period is characterised by the continuation of the class struggle, but under different circumstances. Class conflict within the boundaries of a workers? state is not principally determined by the opposition between wage labour and capital in the workplace.

However the proletariat remains a definite social class. It is not abolished by the revolution but is rather obliged to struggle against the remnants of capitalism within the workers? state and against the continued domination of capitalism on a world scale.

In this struggle the proletariat in a workers? state is no longer simply a class of wage slaves, but rather toilers consciously eradicating the material foundations of their slavery from the advantageous position of being organised as a ruling class. By continuing the class struggle, by raising the productivity of labour and eliminating scarcity the proletariat does not merely negate the bourgeoisie, it also progressively negates its own existence as a definite social class. This goal is completed by means of the transition, but the existence of a transition period implies the continuation of aspects of the ?old society? ? the proletariat, bourgeois methods of distribution and remnants of the operation of the law of value.

The task of the proletarian state is to progressively subordinate the operation of the laws of capitalist society and economy to the principles of conscious planning. It was E. Preobrazhensky, at the time a supporter of Trotsky?s Left Opposition, who, in The New Economics most sharply characterised the essence of the political economy of the transition period as a struggle to subordinate the law of value to the laws of planning.

While the bourgeois revolution is itself only an episode in the development and emancipation of bourgeois mode of production, the task of constructing a socialist economy only:

?begins its chronology with the seizure of power by the proletariat. Neither does that economy grow and develop automatically as the result of expropriation of the capitalists, it has to be consciously constructed by the proletarian state.?12

The development of any economic form means its ousting of other economic forms, the subordination of these forms to the new form, and their gradual ?elimination?.13

Statified property in the hands of even a healthy proletarian state does not have, in the immediate aftermath of the proletarian revolution, an automatically socialist character.

The socialist, or otherwise, character of this post capitalist property is determined by whether or not the
direction of those property relations is towards the triumph of conscious planning for the purpose of constructing a society based on the principle of “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs”. We know of no better short description of the specific characteristics of socialist property than that advanced by Trotsky himself:

“The latter has as its premise the dying away of the state as the guardian of property, the mitigation of inequality and the gradual dissolution of the property concept even in the morals and customs of society.”

There can be no progressive mitigation of inequality, no final triumph of the conscious planning principle over the law of value, no withering away of the state except at the hands of the proletariat democratically organised to exercise its own power. “The emancipation of the working class” remains “the task of the workers themselves.”

Without direct control by the proletariat, the guarantee against the emergence of a distinct stratum of bureaucrats ceases to exist and the vital force that can revolutionise the productive forces in a rounded and dynamic way in order to meet human need?the creative energy of the proletariat itself?is excluded from the planning process.

But what happens in a state where capitalism has been abolished but where the working class has lost or never gained the power to exercise direct political power? It is precisely this question that has faced the Marxist movement ever since the final triumph of Stalin in the USSR.

**The transition blocked**

Can the working class be said to be a ruling class where its political power is not expressed by a revolutionary vanguard linked to the mass of the class by organs of proletarian democracy? Can the dictatorship, the class rule of the workers exist where a bureaucratic dictatorship over the working class has been established?

The history of the development of the capitalist mode of production shows us many instances where the capitalist class either did not exercise, or lost the ability to exercise, direct political power by and for itself. In France, the Napoleonic era, the Restoration period, and the Second Empire of Louis Napoleon all excluded the bourgeoisie from direct access to political power. But such is the nature of the capitalist mode of production and the capitalist class that this in no way hampered the development of the capitalist economy and capitalist relations of production.

Indeed Bonapartism is an inherent tendency of capitalism’s political life?one which becomes dominant in the imperialist epoch. The bourgeoisie’s fear of the proletariat, the fact that its position as ruling class was assured by economic laws over which it had no conscious political control made it possible for the bourgeoisie to tolerate, and even desire in certain circumstances, a form of state that had a tendency to autonomy from direct control by the bourgeoisie itself. This in no way altered the class character of that state as long as it presided over and protected capitalist property relations.

But, as we have seen, the Marxist movement had always seen the proletariat’s direct control over its own state as an indispensable element without which the transition to communism cannot be effected. Trotsky, for example, in 1931 continued to express the view that the very designation of a state as a workers’ state?in this case the USSR?signified that the bourgeoisie would need an armed uprising in order to take power while the workers could revive the party and regime with the methods and on the road to reform.

The history of the rise of the bourgeoisie evidences a series of “political revolutions” where the politically expropriated bourgeoisie struggled to overthrow their political expropriators (after having already sealed
the hegemony of capitalist relations of production). This was the case with the overthrow of the Bourbons in 1830 and the Orleanists at the hands of the French Revolution of 1848.

While the bourgeoisie resorted to revolutionary action and attempted to dress up its actions as a social revolution, these events did not signify the passing of social and economic power from one ruling class to another.

Before the work of Trotsky in the 1930s, based on the concrete experience of the political degeneration of the Soviet Union, the Marxist tradition had made no attempt to study the potential situation of a working class that had succeeded in crushing capitalist power and property but failed to prevent the emergence of a distinct bureaucracy strong enough to deprive the proletariat itself of political power. Trotsky was the first Marxist to develop an analogy between the bourgeois political revolution? and the tasks of the proletariat should it itself be politically expropriated without capitalist property relations having been restored in a social counter-revolution.

In Trotsky?s view the loss of direct political power by the proletariat and its vanguard does not lead immediately or automatically to the re-establishment of the capitalist mode of production. The experience of the USSR shows this to be the case. But should the proletariat and its conscious organised vanguard lose political power then the transition to socialism will be blocked because the only force with a material interest in that transition, and the ability to effect it, will have been prevented from doing so.

The result will be that the state will continue in precisely the form Marxists seek to abolish ? set above and against the toilers. Far from a tendency to ever greater equality, inequalities will continue and solidify. The capitalist norms of distribution and exchange that Marxists seek to destroy and replace with conscious planning at the hands of the mass of toilers will continue and even strengthen. Family life, sexual oppression, the deadening cultural void of human relations under capitalism will not be transformed, but will live on in the post-capitalist society.

Such societies ? although no longer dominated and determined by the laws of the capitalist system of production ? can only advance to communism after the proletariat has seized political power again. The oppressive machinery in the hands of the ruling bureaucracies in the so-called socialist states, the jealously guarded material privileges of the bureaucrats mean that the proletariat cannot seize that power through reform. It will of necessity be forced on the road of political revolution. Thus the monstrous bureaucratic degeneration of the Russian Revolution and the duplication of its essential features ab initio in a whole series of revolutions, does not introduce a question unforeseen by the founders of communism. It does not require a qualitative alteration of the Marxist programme but the development of the anti-bureaucratic content present from its creation.

A vital element of the Marxist programme for constructing communism ? the expropriation of the capitalist class and the centralisation of production on the basis of a plan ? has been implemented in the USSR and the other degenerate workers? states. For this reason we recognise these states to be a historic gain for the working class ? states based on post-capitalist property forms. But without proletarian political power the potential of that property form to revolutionise the productive forces and lay the basis for a communist society cannot be realised. The political power of the bureaucracy and the state forms which defend it remain therefore an obstacle to the realisation of the historic interests of the working class.

Footnotes
2. ibid., p.19.
6. V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, (Moscow, 1964), vol.25, p.481 (our emphasis.)
8. ibid., p.17.
9. ibid., p.18. 10. Ibid., p.18. 11. Ibid., p.19.
13. Ibid., p.77.

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