

Socialism: The transition to Communism

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What is the difference between socialism and communism? How can we get from a capitalist society with all its problems, divisions and inequalities to a communist society?

Karl Marx was not the first to condemn capitalism for the poverty and inequality that it creates, neither was he the first to fight for a society in which poverty and inequality would be eradicated. But he was the first to realise that capitalism itself would create the forces capable of overthrowing it.

Before Marx, utopian socialists, such as Fourier and Owen, believed that an alternative society could be built within capitalism. They drew up plans for societies in which neither exploitation nor oppression were needed to maintain economic production. Once these model communities were established they would rapidly prove to be superior to what already existed.

That was where the problems started. Fourier hoped to win financial backing from a wealthy patron, and declared that he would be available every day to discuss the details. Alas, as he waited, the years passed. He grew older as capitalism grew stronger.

Totally dedicated to the very end, nonetheless, he built nothing. Owen, himself a very wealthy man, invested his fortune in buying territory in America for his town of New Harmony, but was defrauded by his business partner and had to return home with nothing accomplished.

Marx realised that societies do not develop as a result of clever plans or individual dedication. Adam Smith described capitalism after it had developed out of feudal society. The capitalist system did not develop because Adam Smith set out a vision of what it might be like.

Socialism, understood as a society in which the economy was socially owned and output was shared equally, would not be created, fully developed, separate from existing capitalist society. Instead, in historic terms, there would be a period during which capitalist society would be transformed into socialist society, a ?transitional? period.

The struggle for a more just and genuinely human society, therefore, could not turn its back on the actually existing capitalist society. Just as a worker can only work with the tools and raw materials that are available, humanity in general could only create a new society with the ?raw materials? provided by society?s past development.

What were these ?raw materials?? At first sight there appeared to be two:

- 1 the physical apparatus of production or, ?means of production? ? machinery, factories, railways etc.
- 2 the people who made up society.

Whoever was going to change society would themselves be a product of existing society. Tomorrow?s

society would be built by today's people using, initially, today's technology.

One of Marx's most brilliant insights was his realisation that there was, in fact, a third factor in society that had to be taken into account. In order to use the technology of production, 'people' had become organised in a very definite way.

A small number, the capitalists, owned and controlled the 'means of production' while a vastly greater number, the working class, actually operated them. The workers had no real choice in the matter because their only means of survival was the wage they could earn from the capitalists. Marx called this third element the 'relations of production'.

Although not as immediately obvious, it was the third element, the relations of production, that was the most important in terms of changing society. Even in Marx's day, technical progress had made it possible to produce enough for everybody to have a decent standard of living. Poverty was a result of social relations, the unequal shares in the output, not the limitations of technology.

It was precisely the living conditions of the working class, coupled with its centrality within production, that would create the social force, the revolutionary working class, that could transform society into socialism.

The same social relations also meant that the capitalists had every reason to keep things as they were. And they had very effective means of preventing change. The whole organisation of society protected them.

They had the best living conditions, the best education, each generation was trained to take over control and, in addition, the law protected their wealth and was backed up by the more physical means of defence: policemen, soldiers, prisons – in a word, the state.

Marx's political strategy, therefore, had to begin from this understanding of society; the means of production for a better society already existed, the working class needed that better society but the capitalists, protected by the state, were determined to prevent any change. His first attempt to develop a way of overthrowing this minority was presented in the Communist Manifesto of 1848.

In the Manifesto, Marx not only delivered a devastating attack on capitalism but set out the measures that a working class government, brought to power by a democratic revolution, would need to take to begin the transition to socialism.

These included the abolition of private ownership of land, a progressive tax to drain away the wealth of the capitalists, the centralisation of credit in a national bank, state ownership of transport and communications, planned extension of production to meet need and free state education for all children.

In one sense, Marx's predictions were brilliantly confirmed within months. Revolutions shook Europe later in 1848. But the course of events revealed a flaw in this first communist programme. Even where democratic rights were won, as in France, they were not enough to overthrow capitalism.

Out on the streets, the working class was confronted by the armed might of the state. Soldiers and policemen, disciplined and controlled by officers from the richer classes, enforced laws backed up by their officers' relatives in the judiciary. They massacred the workers of Paris and were given medals to commemorate it.

Marx, himself imprisoned during the German revolution, and Engels, who fought in the defeated revolutionary army, later drew a forthright conclusion. Given the human material that made up the state, with its millions of links to the ruling class, there was no possibility that a democratic government could

overthrow the bourgeoisie by an 'Act of Parliament'. The rest of the state machine would simply refuse to carry out orders and would overthrow the elected government.

At first, that was as far as Marx went. Determined not to make the mistake of the utopians by dreaming up personal recipes for the future, he did not return to the question until the class struggle gave him new evidence. In 1871, after France had been defeated by Prussia, the French government agreed to dismantle the defences of Paris. However, the majority of Parisians opposed this, mobilised to stop the guns being moved and forced the government itself to flee.

For three months, Paris had no government, no state apparatus, in the ordinary sense of the word. For the first time, working class men and women took charge of a modern capital city. They created their own system of 'government', a radical democracy, the 'Paris Commune' in which delegates were elected by universal suffrage from each city district.

The delegates had responsibility for the defence of the city, distributing what food was available and formulating the laws by which the city would now live. They met in public and their decisions were enforced by the people themselves - when they declared the eight hour day and a minimum wage they did not need a judicial commission to work out how to introduce it.

Well aware of how popular representatives could become corrupted by power, the Commune decreed that no official would receive more than a worker's wage and that all delegates were immediately recallable by their electors. Real accountability, not the empty democracy which allows an MP, once elected, to ignore the electors for the next five years!

Marx saw in the Paris Commune more than just an episodic adventure in democracy. He realised that it had revealed the key to the problem of how forces created by capitalist society could, through revolutionary struggle, transform themselves into the first stage of the new society.

The existing state had to be smashed, that he already knew, but Paris showed how a new form of social organisation, the commune, could carry out those functions of state power that would still be necessary during the transition, such as defence, reconstruction and economic organisation, without forming a new oppressive apparatus standing above the people.

More than that, because the population as a whole now had responsibility for 'government', individuals were themselves transformed. Attitudes and assumptions that had been formed under capitalist rule were left behind. It was not yet socialism, but the road to socialism - the transition period - had been opened.

Marx developed his conclusions further in the mid-1870s by sketching out what he thought could be said with some certainty about this transitional period. In the aftermath of revolution, the economic system would be whatever had been created by capitalism.

Marx assumed that the first task of the new commune state would be to get the economy working again. All who could would be required to work and, since the commune would have confiscated the wealth of the bourgeoisie, society would make rapid strides towards economic equality.

However, although utilising existing industrial capacity on a rationally planned basis would be a huge step forward, society would still be marked by its origins in capitalism. Inequality would be reduced but the actual scale of production would still be limited. In the longer run, it would be necessary for society to transform that as well. Regional and national inequalities had to be overcome.

Reversing the dramatic underdevelopment of vast areas of the globe would require planned re-allocation of

resources and the creation of a genuinely democratic division of labour within a global economy.

Marx, therefore, further refined the concept of a 'transition society' and introduced the idea that the development of communist society would take place in two phases. In the first stage, 'socialism' as he called it, the commune state was still necessary both to defeat all attempts at counter-revolution and to reconstruct the international economic system on an egalitarian and planned basis.

This, Marx called, the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Dictatorship is frequently counterposed to democracy. Yet for Marx the concept of dictatorship was necessary and justified. Indeed, it was a very democratic dictatorship. Democratic, that is, for the vast majority, the working class; dictatorial over the bosses who would try to sabotage progress and crush the new regime through counter-revolution.

How long this transition would take was not predictable but Marx pointed out that the more successful the commune was the less necessary it would become. Once the bourgeoisie had been eliminated as a class, for example, there would be no need for military organisation or defence expenditure.

In the longer term, the transition would be completed when society no longer needed a political force, a state of any sort, in order to organise production and distribution.

Administration would still be necessary but in an egalitarian society this would not involve the subordination of one part of the population by another, it would no longer be 'political'. This would be communist society.?

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