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# Perspective of Communism, part 2: Is communism against human nature?

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*In the first part of this series, we saw that communism is not merely an old dream of humanity, or the simple product of human will, but is the only form of society which can overcome the contradictions strangling the capitalist system. After developing the productive forces to an unprecedented degree and having constructed a world economy, capitalism then entered into its era of decadence. The permanent barbarism of this era has made communism a necessity not only for the further progress of humanity but even for its simple survival. Thus, contrary to those who announced the 'death of communism' when the Stalinist regimes of the east collapsed, it is impossible to reform capitalism or make it more human.*

*In this second part, we are going to look at those who tell us that a communist society as envisaged by Marx and others is in any case impossible to realise because the characteristic features of capitalism, such as egoism, lust for wealth and power, the war of each against all, are actually unchangeable expressions of 'human nature'.*

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## Human nature

'Human nature' is a bit like the Philosophers' Stone for which the alchemists searched for centuries. Up till now, all significant studies of 'social invariants' (as the sociologists would have it) — i.e. characteristics of human behaviour which are the same in all societies — have ended up showing the extent to which human psychology and attitudes are variable and linked to the social framework in which the individual develops. In fact, if we wanted to point to a fundamental characteristic of this 'human nature', to the feature which distinguishes man from other animals, we would have to point out the enormous importance of 'acquired' as opposed to the 'innate'; to the decisive role played by education, by the social environment in which human beings grow up.

*"The operations carried out by a spider resemble those of a weaver, and many a human architect is put to shame by the bee in the construction of its wax cells. However, the poorest architect is categorically distinguished from the best of bees by the fact that before he builds a cell in wax, he has built it in his head."* (Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1)

The bee is genetically programmed to build perfect hexagons, and it's the same with the homing pigeon which can find its home at a distance of hundreds of miles, or with the squirrel storing up nuts. On the other hand, the final form of the structure conceived by our architect is not so much determined by a genetic inheritance as by a whole series of elements provided by the society in which he/she lives. Whether we're talking about the kind of structure we have been told to build, the materials and tools that can be used, the productive techniques and the skills that can be applied,

the scientific knowledge and artistic canons that guide us - all of this is determined by the social milieu.

Apart from that, the part played in all of this by 'innate' characteristics transmitted genetically to the architect by the parents can be essentially reduced to the fact that the fruit of their union wasn't a bee or a pigeon, but a human being like themselves: i.e. an individual belonging to an animal species in which the 'acquired' element is by far the most important factor in the development of the adult.

It's the same with behaviour as it is with the products of labour. Thus theft is a 'crime', a perturbation in the functioning of society which would become catastrophic if it became generalised. One who steals, or who threatens, abducts or kills people with the aim of stealing, is a 'criminal', and will almost unanimously be considered as a harmful, anti-social element who must be 'prevented from doing harm' (unless of course he does this stealing within the framework of the existing laws, in which case the skill in extorting surplus value from the proletariat will be praised and generously rewarded, just as generals skilled in mass murder are awarded medals). But the behaviour known as 'stealing', and criminals who 'steal', 'murder', etc, as well as everything to do with them - laws, judges, policemen, prisons, detective films, crime novels - would any of this exist if there was nothing to steal? If the abundance made possible by the development of the productive forces was at the free disposition of every member of society? Obviously not! And we could give many more examples showing just how much behaviour, attitudes, feelings, and relations between human beings are determined by the social milieu.

The peevish-minded will object to this by saying that if asocial behaviour exists, no matter what form it takes, in different forms of society, it's because at the root of 'human nature' there's an anti-social element, an element of aggressiveness against others, of 'potential criminality'. They will argue that, very often, people don't steal out of material necessity; that gratuitous crime exists; that if the Nazis could commit such atrocities, it's because there's something evil in Man, which comes to the surface in certain conditions. In fact such objections only show that there's no human nature which is 'good' or 'bad' in itself; Man is a social animal whose numerous potentialities take on different expressions depending on the conditions that are lived in. Statistics speak eloquently on this question: is it 'human nature' which gets worse during periods of crisis in society, when we see a growth in criminality and all kinds of morbid behaviour? On the contrary, isn't the development of 'asocial' attitudes among an increasing number of individuals the expression of the fact that the existing society is becoming more and more incapable of satisfying human needs - needs which are eminently social and which can no longer be satisfied in a system which is less and less functioning as a society, a community?

The same peevish spirits base their rejection of the possibility of communism on the following argument: 'You talk about a society which will really satisfy human needs, but the desire for property and power over others are themselves essential human needs, and communism, which excludes them, is therefore unable to satisfy human needs. Communism is impossible because man is egoistic.'

In her 'Introduction to Political Economy' Rosa Luxemburg described the reaction of the British bourgeoisie when, in the cause of conquering India, they came across peoples who had no private property. They consoled themselves by saying that these people were 'savages', but it was still rather embarrassing for people who had been taught that private property was something 'natural' to conclude that it was precisely these 'savages' who had the most 'artificial' way of living! In reality, humanity has such a 'natural need for private property' that it did without it for over a million years. And in many cases it was only after bloody massacres, as in the case of the Indians described by Rosa Luxemburg, that they were instilled with this 'natural need'. It's the same with commerce, that

'unique, natural' form of the circulation of goods, the natives' ignorance of which so scandalised the colonialists. Inseparable from private property, it arose with it and will disappear with it.

There's also the idea that if there was no profit to stimulate the development of production, if the individual effort of the worker wasn't recompensed by a wage, no one would produce anything anymore. True enough, no one would produce in a capitalist way anymore; i.e. in a system based on profit and wage labour, where the slightest scientific discovery has to be financially viable, where work is a curse to the overwhelming majority of workers, on account of its length, its intensity, and its inhuman form. On the other hand, does the scientist who, through his research, participates in the progress of technology, always need a material stimulant to work? Generally they're paid less than the sales executive who makes no contribution to the advancement of knowledge. Is manual labour necessarily disagreeable? If so, why do people talk about the 'love of craftsmanship', why is there such a craze for 'do-it-yourself' and all sorts of manual activities which are often very expensive? In fact, when labour isn't alienated, absurd, exhausting, when its products no longer become forces hostile to the workers, but serve to really satisfy the needs of the collective then labour will become a prime human need, one of the essential forms of the flourishing of human potential. In communist society, human beings will produce for pleasure.

## **The need for power**

Because leaders and authority-figures exist today, it's generally concluded that no society can do without leaders, that men and women will never be able to live without submitting to authority and exerting it on others.

We won't repeat here what marxism has always said about the role of political institutions, about the nature of state power. It can be summarised in the idea that the existence of political authority, of the power of some people over others, is the result of the existence within society of conflicts and confrontations between groups of individuals (social classes) which have antagonistic interests.

A society in which people compete with each other, in which they have opposing interests, in which productive labour is a curse, in which coercion is a permanent fact of life, in which the most elementary human needs are crushed underfoot for the great majority - such a society 'needs' leaders, just as it needs policemen and religion. But once all these aberrations have been suppressed, we'll soon see whether leaders and power will still be necessary. Our sceptic will respond: 'but men need to dominate others or be dominated. Whatever kind of society you have, there will still be the power of some people over others.' It's true that a slave who has always had his feet in chains may have the impression that there is no other way of walking, but a free person will never have this impression. In communist society, free men and women won't be like the frogs in the fairytale who wanted to have a king. The 'need' that people may have to exercise power over others is the flip-side of what could be called the 'slave mentality': a significant example of this is the cringing, obedient army adjutant who's always barking orders at his 'inferiors'. If people feel a need to exert power over others, it's because they have no power over their own lives and over the running of society as a whole. The will to power in each person is the measure of their own impotence. In a society in which human beings are no longer the impotent slaves of either natural or economic laws, a society in which they have freed themselves from the latter and are consciously able to use the former for their own purposes, a society in which they are 'masters without slaves', they will no longer need that wretched substitute for power - the domination of others.

It's the same with aggressiveness as with the so-called 'lust for power'. Faced with the permanent aggression of a society which grinds them into the dirt, plunges them into perpetual anguish and represses all their most basic desires, individuals are necessarily aggressive. This is no more than

the survival instinct, which exists in all animals. Some psychologists consider that aggression is an inherent compulsion in all animal species and will therefore express itself in all circumstances. But even if this is the case, let's give humanity the chance to use this aggression to combat the material obstacles which stand in the way of our own development - then we'll see whether there's a real need to exert aggression against other people.

## Man's egoism

'Everyone for themselves' is supposed to be a basic human characteristic. It's undoubtedly a characteristic of bourgeois humanity with its ideal of the 'self-made man', but this is simply the ideological expression of the economic reality of capitalism and has nothing to do with 'human nature'. Otherwise one would have to say that 'human nature' has been radically transformed since primitive communism, or even since feudalism with its village communities. In fact individualism massively entered the world of ideas when small independent owners appeared in the countryside (when serfdom was abolished) and in the towns. Made up of small owners who had been successful - mainly by ruining their rivals - the bourgeoisie was a fanatical adherent of this ideology and saw it as a fact of nature. For example, it had no scruples about using Darwin's theory of evolution to justify the social 'struggle for survival', the war of all against all.

But with the appearance of the proletariat, the associated class par excellence, a breach was opened in the domination of individualism. For the working class, solidarity is the elementary precondition for defending its material interests. At this level of reasoning, we can already reply to those who claim that human beings are 'naturally egoistic'. If they are egoistic they are also intelligent, and the simple desire to defend their interests pushes them towards association and solidarity as soon as the social conditions allow it. But this isn't all: in this social being par excellence, solidarity and altruism are essential needs in more ways than one. People need the solidarity of others, but they also need to show solidarity to others. This is something which can be seen even in a society as alienated as ours, expressed in the seemingly banal idea that 'everyone needs to feel useful to others'. Some will argue that altruism is also a form of egoism because those that practise it do it above all for their own pleasure. Fair enough - but that's just another way of putting forward the idea defended by communists that there is no essential opposition - on the contrary - between individual interest and collective interest. The opposition between individual and society is an expression of societies of exploitation, societies based on private property (i.e. private to others), and all this is very logical - how could there be a harmony between those who suffer from oppression and the very institutions that guarantee and perpetuate this oppression? In such a society, altruism can only appear in the form of charity or of sacrifice, i.e. the negation of others or the negation of oneself; it does not appear as the affirmation, the common and complementary flowering of the self and others.

Contrary to what the bourgeoisie would like us to believe, communism is not, therefore, the negation of individuality. It is capitalism, which reduces the worker to an appendage of the machine, which negates individuality; and this negation of the individual has reached its most extreme limits under the specific form of capitalism in decay: state capitalism. In communism, in a society which has got rid of that enemy of freedom par excellence - the state, which will have no reason for existing - each member of society will be living in the reign of freedom. Because humanity can only realise its innumerable potentialities in a social way, and because the antagonisms between individual interest and collective interest will have disappeared, new and immense vistas will be opened up for the flowering of each individual.

Similarly, far from accentuating the dreary uniformity that has been generalised by capitalism, as the bourgeoisie claims, communism is above all a society of diversity, because it will break down the

division of labour which fixes each individual in a single role for the rest of their life. In communism, each new step forward in knowledge or technology won't lead to an even higher level of specialisation, but will serve to expand the field of activities through which each individual can develop. As Marx and Engels put it:

*"...as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for one to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic." (The German Ideology)*

Whatever the bourgeoisie and all the sceptical and peevish-minded may say, communism is made for humanity; human beings can live in such a society and make such a society live!

There remains an argument to deal with: 'OK, communism is necessary and materially possible. Yes, men and women could live in such a society. But today humanity is so alienated under capitalist society that it will never have the strength to undertake a transformation as gigantic as the communist revolution.' We'll try to answer this in the next part of the article. FM

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