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Perspective of Communism, part 3: Why the proletariat is a communist class

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In the first two parts of this article (see World Revolution 271 and 272) we established, first of all, that communism isn't simply an old dream of humanity or the mere product of human will, but that the necessity and possibility of communism were based directly on the material conditions developed by capitalism; secondly, that against all the prejudices about 'human nature' making it impossible for humanity to live in such a society, communism really is the kind of society that is most able to allow each individual to flourish to the full. We still have to deal with another question against the possibility of communism: '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 now.

Is communism inevitable?

Before dealing directly with the question of the concrete possibility of the transition from capitalism to communism, we have to be clear about the idea that communism is certain and inevitable.

A revolutionary like Bordiga could once write: "*The communist revolution is as certain as if it had already happened.*" This really is a distorted view of marxism. While it can draw out certain laws about the development of societies, marxism resolutely rejects any idea of a kind of human destiny, written in advance in the great book of nature. Just as the evolution of the species doesn't involve any finality, i.e. it's not a movement of progressive approximation towards some kind of perfect model, so the evolution of human societies isn't moving towards a model established in advance. Such a vision belongs to idealism: it was the philosopher Hegel, for example, who considered that each form of society was a progressive step towards the realisation of an 'Absolute Ideal' hovering above men and history. Similarly, the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin thought that man is evolving towards a 'Point Omega' which has been fixed for all time. While the study of history can enable us to grasp the general laws of social evolution in relation to the development of the productive forces, it also tells us that history is full of examples of societies which have hardly evolved at all; societies which, far from giving rise to more progressive forms of social development, have either stagnated for thousands of years, like the Asiatic societies, or have simply decayed on their feet, like ancient Greek society. As a general rule, the mere fact that a whole society has entered into decadence in no way means that it contains within itself the basis for a higher social form; it can just as easily collapse into barbarism and lose most of the cultural acquisitions and productive techniques which had determined and accompanied its former development.

It's a very particular kind of society, capitalism, which developed on the ruins of the feudal society of western Europe, and which has created on a world-scale (being the most dynamic form of society

that has ever existed) the material conditions for communism. But capitalism, like many other societies, is not immune from the danger of total decay and decomposition, of annihilating all the advances it has made and dragging humanity several centuries or several thousand years backwards. In practical terms, it's not hard to see that this system has created the means for the self-destruction of all human society, precisely because it has extended its domination across the whole planet and has reached such a level of technical mastery. As we've already seen, the conditions which make communism possible and necessary are also the conditions which threaten humanity with irreversible decline or total destruction.

Revolutionaries are not charlatans; they don't go about announcing the inevitable advent of a golden age which we have only to wait for quietly. Their role isn't to preach sermons of consolation to humanity in distress. But while they can have no certainty about the inevitable coming of communism (it's precisely because they're not certain that they dedicate their lives to the struggle to make what is possible become a reality), they must insist on the real possibility of such a society - not only on the level of material possibilities or of the theoretical capacity of human beings to live in such a society, but also as regards the capacity of humanity to make this decisive leap from capitalism to communism, to make the communist revolution.

The subject of the communist revolution

Because of the failure of past revolutions, whether they were crushed like those in Germany and Hungary in 1919, or whether they degenerated as in Russia, the average bourgeois draws the conclusion that the revolution is impossible. He has a grim warning for all who want to embark on such ventures: "Woe betide you if you try to revolt! And if you ever do, look what happened in Russia!" It's quite understandable that the bourgeoisie should think like this: it's in line with its interests as a privileged, exploiting class. And this doesn't mean that the bourgeoisie itself isn't alienated. On the contrary, as Marx and Engels wrote:

"The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence." (Marx, *The Holy Family*).

But, however ferocious their exploitation, however inhuman their living conditions over the past fifty years, workers have been impressed by such arguments, to the point of virtually giving up any hope of emancipating themselves. This despair has allowed all sorts of theories to blossom, notably those of Professor Marcuse^[1] ^[1], according to which the working class is no longer a revolutionary class, is integrated into the system, so that the only hope for the revolution lies with the marginal strata, those who are excluded from present-day society like 'the young', 'blacks', 'women', 'students' or the peoples of the Third World. Others arrived at the idea that the revolution would be the work of a 'universal class' regrouping nearly everyone in society.

What actually lies behind all these theories about the 'integration' of the working class is a petty-bourgeois disdain for the class (hence the success of these theories in the milieu of the intellectual and student petty bourgeoisie). For the bourgeois and petty bourgeois that follow in his footsteps, the workers are nothing but poor sods that lack the will or intelligence to make anything of their lives. They spend the whole of their lives being brutalised: instead of breaking out of their conditions they fritter away all their leisure-time in the pub or stuck in front of the TV, the only thing that arouses their interest being the Cup Final or the latest scandal. And, when they do demand something, it's just a measly wage rise so that they can be even more alienated by the 'consumer society'.

After the patent failure or recuperation of the marginal movements that were supposed to overturn the established order, it's understandable that those who held such theories should now be giving up any perspective of changing society. The most astute of them are now becoming 'new philosophers' or officials of the social democratic parties; the less well provided for are drifting into scepticism, demoralisation, drugs or suicide. Once one has understood that it won't come from 'all men of good will' (as the Christians believe), or from the universal class (as *Invariance* [2] [2] believes), or from the much-vaunted marginal strata, or from the peasants of the Third World as Maoism and Guevarism claim, then one can see that the only hope for the regeneration of society lies with the working class. And it's because they have a static vision of the working class, seeing it as a mere collection of individual workers, that the sceptics of today don't think that the working class is capable of making the revolution.

As early as 1845, Marx and Engels replied to these kinds of objections:

"It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the proletariat as a whole, may imagine for the moment to be the aim. It is a question of what the proletariat actually is and what it will be compelled to do historically as the result of this being" (*The Holy Family*).

If you consider that the working class will never be anything but a sum of what its members are today, then no, the revolution will never be possible. But such a viewpoint makes an abstraction of two fundamental aspects of reality:

- The whole is always more than the sum of its parts;
- Reality is movement. The elements of nature are not immutable and the elements of human societies even less so. That's why one must avoid taking a photograph of the present situation and thinking that this is an eternal reality. On the contrary one must grasp what exactly is this "historic being" of the proletariat which pushes it towards communism.

Exploited class and revolutionary class

Marx and Engels tried to answer this question in *The Holy Family*:

"When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism pretends to believe, because they regard the proletariat as gods. Rather the contrary. Since in the fully-formed proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need - the practical expression of necessity - is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself." (*The Holy Family*).

However this answer is still insufficient. This description of capitalist society can also be applied to all class societies; this description of the working class can be applied to all exploited classes. This passage explains why, like all other exploited classes, the proletariat is compelled to revolt, but it doesn't say why this revolt can and must lead to revolution i.e. the overthrow of one kind of society and its replacement by another: in short, why the working class is a revolutionary class.

As sceptics of all kinds are prone to point out, it's not enough for a class to be exploited for it to be revolutionary. And in fact, in the past, the opposite has been the case. In their day, the nobility

fighting against slave society and the bourgeoisie fighting against feudalism were revolutionary classes. This didn't make them exploited: on the contrary, they were both exploiting classes. On the other hand, the revolts of the exploited classes in these societies - slaves and serfs - never resulted in a revolution. A revolutionary class is a class whose domination over society is in accordance with the establishment and extension of the new relations of production made necessary by the development of the productive forces, to the detriment of the old, obsolescent relations of production.

Because both slave society and feudal society could only give rise to another exploitative society - due to the level of the development of the productive forces In those periods - the revolution could only be led:

- by an exploiting class;
- by a class which wasn't specific to the declining society, while those classes who **were** couldn't be revolutionary, either because they were exploited or because they had privileges to defend.

In contrast, since capitalism has developed the conditions which make the elimination of all exploitation both possible and necessary, the revolution against it can only be made:

- by an exploited class;
- by a class which is specific to capitalist society.

The proletariat is the only class in present day society which meets these two criteria; it's the only revolutionary class in present-day society. Thus we can now respond to the central objection which this article set out to deal with. Yes, the proletariat is an alienated class, subjected to the whole weight of the ruling bourgeois ideology; but because it produces the bulk of social wealth and is thus more and more shouldering the burdens of the capitalist crisis, it's going to be compelled to revolt. And in contrast to the revolts of previous exploited classes, the revolt of the proletariat isn't a desperate one: it contains within itself the possibility of revolution and communism.

The objection can be raised that there have been attempts at a proletarian revolution but that they have all failed. But just as the fact that the plague decimated society for centuries didn't mean that humanity would have to suffer this scourge for ever, so the failure of past revolutions shouldn't lead us to the conclusion that the revolution is impossible. The main thing which held back the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 was the fact that the proletariat's consciousness lagged behind its material existence: although its old conditions of struggle had become obsolete once capitalism had passed from its zenith to its decadent phase, the class didn't become aware of this in time. It thus went through a terrible counter-revolution which silenced it for decades.

Once again, we don't pretend that victory is certain. But even if there is only a chance in a thousand that we're going to win, the stakes involved in today's struggles are so momentous that, far from demoralising us, this should galvanize the energies of all those who sincerely aspire to a different kind of society. Far from despising, ignoring or underestimating the present struggle of the working class, we must understand the decisive importance of these battles. Because the proletariat is both an exploited class and a revolutionary class, its struggles against the effects of exploitation prepare the way for the abolition of exploitation; its struggles against the effects of the crisis prepare the way for the destruction of a society in mortal crisis; and the unity and consciousness forged during these struggles are the point of departure for the unity and consciousness which will enable the proletariat to overthrow capitalism and create a communist society. *FM*

[1] [3] Marcuse was a 1960s guru of student and third world radicalism.

[2] [4] *Invariance* was a group that came out of Bordigism in the 1970s and evolved towards the idea of a universal class that would make the revolution instead of the proletariat.

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