

Marxism and the Productive Forces (Part 2)

IF, INDEED, capitalism can recover after each crisis and maintain some growth, albeit at a slower rate, this has implications for the ability of capitalism to absorb revolutionary pressures. It was assumed in the old days that, as soon as the flow of super-profits derived from the exploitation of the colonies ceased, all the reforms and concessions previously conceded to the working class would be under attack. In fact the expansion of the post-war Welfare State coincided with the break up of the Empire. It is true that the direct exploitation of the colonies was replaced by less obvious economic exploitation of the now formally independent areas and of the Third World generally, and that the long and unexpected post-war boom delayed this onslaught which was only started in earnest by the Thatcher government.

But despite the mass unemployment, attacks on the unions and erosion of the Welfare State the revolutionary developments anticipated by Trotskyists have not materialised. There has been resistance by sections of the working class – the miners' strike, Wapping, the teachers' and civil servants' disputes – but the fact must be faced that these have not triggered any generalised struggle or general radicalisation of the working class, nor a move by significant numbers towards revolutionary politics or organisations, which should be reflected in a breakthrough by Trotskyists. This is not due solely to subjective factors – possible mistakes and incorrect tactics, and the fragmentation of the movement. A better explanation is the fact that despite the recession there has not been a general drop in the standard of living of the majority of the working class. The main brunt of the recession has fallen on the minority – workers in the old industries, the blacks, the youth, single parents, the sick. In the meanwhile the real wages of the workers in employment – the majority of the working class – have risen (to the despair of Thatcher, Lawson and the CBI).

It is not sufficient to explain the fact that the miners, print workers and others were left to fight on their own by the "treachery" of the Kinnocks, Brenda Deans and others, or the failure of militants to overcome these leaders. Whence

comes the continuing dominance of the Kinnocks and others? How come they can still defeat the Left and the militants? Surely the unpalatable answer is that they do reflect the passivity of large layers of workers and that this passivity is fed by, among other things, economic conditions, by the fact that even during the recession large numbers of workers were able to obtain real wage increases without too much struggle, precisely because of market conditions. Capitalism is still able to afford to head off much of the opposition to sackings and redundancies and nip potential revolutionary developments in the bud with relatively large redundancy payments. Without them would the recent dock strike have collapsed as it did? Despite the cuts, unemployment benefit and other welfare payments and redundancy handouts are still a major factor in damping down opposition to the system. The Thatcher government knows just how far to go without endangering the whole system.

The situation in Britain is paralleled by those in the other Western capitalist countries. None of this would be possible if the theories of automatic collapse of capitalism and falling production were true. In 1988, despite the world-wide recession, GDP in all the OECD countries had increased since 1970 by an average of 62%, energy requirements by 25%, vehicle stocks by 89% and industrial production by 53% (Report of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris 1989). Even in Britain, the lame duck of Western capitalism, the CBI lamented that its estimates of economic growth would be 2.5% next year [1990], falling to 2.3% the following year, with manufacturing dropping to 4% and then 2.4%. Low rates of growth indeed, but not an absolute halt or drop.

The World Context: The Third World

So far the argument has ignored the effects of world capitalism on the under-developed countries. Here the law of uneven and combined development, the breaking up of pre-capitalist social formations and the distorting penetration of international capital have led to de-stabilisation and complex conflicts; struggles for national liberation have not freed these countries from the

effects of exploitation by international capital, or prevented the replacement of relative self-sufficiency by dependence on one single exportable cash crop whose drop in price on the world market can bring misery and collapse. On top of economic under-development civil, national and tribal conflicts (Nigeria and Biafra, Zimbabwe) undermine the economy and intensify famines whose basic causes are the effects of the uneven development of the world market (Ethiopia, Sudan).

The obverse side of the growth of Western European, North American and Japanese economies and the relative social stability has been the revolutionary developments in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Chinese and Cuban revolutions, Nicaragua, the liberation struggles in Algeria, Mozambique and Angola and Vietnam led some to the conclusion that the epicentre of the world revolutionary struggle had shifted away from the advanced capitalist countries. But it is difficult to envisage the destruction of capitalism on a world scale by this road in the absence of socialist revolutions in the heartlands of capitalism – the advanced industrial countries. Therefore we must return to examine the prospects of revolution in advanced capitalist society.

Revolutionary Prospects

Having examined the economic factors, I now turn to the political ones. As I have already pointed out, even if capitalism were to collapse, to cease to function economically, it would still require a political overturn – a revolution – to lay the basis for a new social system to replace it. At the most, the contradictions in capitalism and their economic consequences will create revolutionary situations – revolutionary possibilities. For these possibilities to be turned into actual successful revolutions a whole dynamic conjunction of objective and subjective factors has to be present and interact in the right way. A study of the history of revolutions since 1914 – when, according to Marxist theory, capitalism had already exhausted its historical role – shows that despite numerous revolutionary situations that have since arisen, when all the “objective” factors have been present, there have been countless failures and not a single successful revolution in any advanced industrialised country. (1917 Russia was not an advanced industrialised country.)

It would take too long to examine all these in detail, so I will limit myself to citing Germany 1923 to illustrate the point I will be making. It was the paradigm for a revolutionary situation. None could have been more favourable (or has been since) in terms of objective and subjective factors. The economy had earlier in the year collapsed into uncontrolled inflation, money had become worthless, the middle class was ruined, businesses closed. The economic crisis was compounded by a

political one, the Ruhr was occupied by Allied troops to enforce war reparations, all classes were in turmoil. The German industrial proletariat was the most advanced in Europe. There existed a Communist Party with mass working class support which had for months, with Comintern support, been preparing the uprising, setting up arms stores etc. Yet revolution failed to materialise. No doubt one can point to shortcomings and mistakes by the leadership of the German CP. But that is not the point. Every failure of the working class to take power in a revolutionary situation (Britain 1926, Spain 1936, Germany 1933, Italy-France-Greece 1943-5, France 1968, Portugal 1974) can be explained by some objective or subjective factor, by the treachery of social-democratic, centrist, or Stalinist leaderships, by the errors or shortcomings of a revolutionary leadership, by the absence of a revolutionary party or a combination of these.

The point I am trying to make is that the odds against everything going right are rather long. In other words, most revolutionary situations have ended in defeats. Successful revolutions are possible but not inevitable. There is no reason to believe that the situation in the future will be any different. Between 1917 and 1923 there was a Bolshevik Party and Third International still untainted by Stalinism; there were, at least in Germany and several other countries, Communist Parties either with mass support or at least with a far better relationship with the working class than any Marxist revolutionary organisation has today. If the building of a revolutionary mass party is a condition for successful revolution – and if we compare this to reaching the summit of the Himalayas, then the German CP of 1923 was reaching the top, but none of today's revolutionary groups (except possibly in Argentina) has barely started reconstructing the first base camp.

At this stage comrades will either be shaking their fists in anger at this revisionism or, the older more tolerant ones, shaking their heads in sorrow and muttering “Poor old Harry – another comrade who has lost his faith in the working class!” It is not a question of “faith”, which can be defined as “belief without adequate reason”, but of facing the facts and drawing the necessary conclusions, however unpalatable – that so far, despite the supposed over-ripeness and decay of capitalism, the working class has failed to take and hold power in any advanced industrialised country. Revolution is still possible. The need and justification for replacing capitalism with a better and more rational system is still there because capitalism, even if its collapse is not inevitable, is a system that generates misery, oppression and violence; because under capitalism the gap between the misery that is and the plenty and abundance that could be under a different system is ever wider.

But at least let us be under no illusions about “historical inevitability”.

To summarise the argument so far. I have argued:

(1) There is nothing in Marxist analysis from which we can deduce an absolute ceiling to economic growth under capitalism. The contradiction between socialised production and private appropriation results in a growing gap between what actually is produced and what could be produced if the productive forces were rationally utilised and planned. A gap that is probably greater now than in Marx's time.

(2) Capitalism will not collapse automatically but will have to be overthrown politically.

(3) Successful revolutions are not inevitable. It is likely that many more future revolutionary situations will come and go before revolutionary parties are built capable of successfully leading revolutions in several countries so as to provide a broad enough international base for them to survive.

(4) From (1), (2) and (3) it follows that after each unrealised revolution, after each crisis, capitalism will go on. Since no social system stands still and is always in the process of change – what form, if world revolution continues to fail to materialise, will capitalism or a post-capitalist society take? This is not a new question. It has been posed before. When in the 1930's the question was being debated as to whether the Stalinist regime in Russia represented merely a temporary phenomenon of an isolated and degenerated workers' state which would be eliminated either by world revolution or the restoration of capitalism, or a new historical social system, indicating the inability of the proletariat either to seize power or to hold on to it – Trotsky himself posed the question:

“However onerous this ... perspective may be, if the world proletariat should actually prove incapable of accomplishing its mission ... nothing else would remain but to recognize openly that the socialist programme, based on the internal contradictions of capitalist society, had petered out as a Utopia.... It is self evident that [if the Marxist programme turned out to be impracticable] a new minimum programme would be required – to defend the interests of the slaves of the totalitarian bureaucratic system.” (“The USSR in War”, September 1939, quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 1963, p.468.)

It is true, as Deutscher pointed out, that Trotsky uttered these words for the sake of the argument that Stalinism was not a new historical social system and declared that the final test for the working class, for socialism, and for Marxism was imminent: it was coming with the Second World War. If the war were not to lead to proletarian revolution in the West, then the place of decaying capitalism would indeed be taken

not by socialism, but by a new bureaucratic and totalitarian system of exploitation. Well, Trotsky was wrong. The war did not lead either to revolution or to new totalitarian bureaucracies. It is no answer to say Trotsky's mistake was only one of tempo. Every new failure of revolutionary situations to lead to revolution, every delay or failure of Trotskyists (who claim to have the only correct analysis and represent the “historic interests” of the working class) to build revolutionary parties out of these situations, poses anew the questions – Is proletarian revolution inevitable? And in its absence what form will late capitalism or post-capitalist societies take? Bureaucratic collectivism, state capitalism ... or what?

The answer to the first question is “No”. Revolution depends in the last analysis not on economic determinism but on the actions of human beings. (In any case, as I have tried to show, catastrophic economic conclusions cannot be logically deduced from Marxist schemata.) As to the second question this is beyond the scope of this paper – a detailed discussion would necessitate several lengthy papers. I will therefore restrict myself to indicating possible variants.

It is possible that the problems facing capitalism will not be so much the limited ability of the market to absorb increased production but the effects of uncontrolled and unplanned growth on the environment. As the powers of science and technology to affect the environment increase, so do the dangers of environmental damage (the destruction of rain forests, the greenhouse effect), of pollution and nuclear accidents. These dangers cry out for planned control and direction of the world's resources on an international scale and the curbing of the effects of unplanned production for profit. The contradiction between the development of productive forces and their private ownership grows but for reasons other than those Marx envisaged.

The big question is: how can this contradiction be resolved, how can the anarchy and planlessness of the market be replaced by social and planned control of productive forces in the absence of world proletarian revolution? Is capitalism capable of “self reform”? Marxists have always argued that no ruling class will give up its power without a struggle. But may it not be forced to do so, at least partially, and sufficiently, under the threat of global disaster (which would include its own destruction in the process)? We have already seen how ruling classes have eventually granted reforms under the threat of revolutionary upheaval – reforms which while not abolishing capitalism have attenuated its effects sufficiently to head off its overthrow.

Under a combination of these pressures is it not possible to envisage the acceptance by big business of controls and direction by its “own” state and by international and supra-national

state institutions leading eventually to overall planning on a world scale? We must also pose the question of whether the only alternatives are either complete success or complete failure of world revolution. Is it not possible that the revolution might partially succeed and a long period of intermediate social formations ensue? The answer is that this is the situation we have been in since 1917 with the partial success of the world revolution and the existence of a whole range of social formations neither fully socialist or capitalist – the USSR, China, Cuba, Vietnam etc. And these themselves are now in turmoil, posing the question of whether this heralds a restoration of capitalism, or whether the working class will be able to regain power and maintain a planned economy with democratic control. Or whether neither will take place, but some in-between result. Will the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917, its subsequent isolation, degeneration and collapse be seen historically and retrospectively as the result of a premature attempt at world revolution – bound to fail precisely because it was premature, because world capitalism was not yet in the epoch of its terminal decline? (If this was indeed the case

this in no way implies that the Bolsheviks were wrong to seize power. They were not endowed with miraculous hindsight. In the circumstances of 1917 the only way of testing the truth of Lenin's theory of Imperialism, the only way of testing whether world capitalism was ripe for overthrow was to have a go at overthrowing it. You cannot insist on a guarantee of victory before engaging in struggle.)

We have tended to think in over-simplified and abstract terms of a historical progression: feudalism – capitalism – proletarian revolution – workers' state – withering of the state – socialism (from each according to his work) as the first stage towards full communism (from each according to his need and the end of politics). Real historical progress is much more complex. There may be all sorts of intermediary formations and possibilities (Pablo's centuries of "deformed workers' states", partial revolutions, hybrid regimes, societies in various stages of transition, alternations of periods of sharp changes with periods of slower evolution). We may eventually arrive at a communist society, but by a much more circuitous route than we envisaged.