

COMMENTARY

THE REIFICATION OF THE PROLETARIAT

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I will start with a restatement of the reified concept of the proletariat: the proletariat is, by its very existence, a (the) potentially revolutionary force — this quality being definitive of its very existence. Given its existence, its (potential) function in the transformation of society is also given — realisation of its existence. Now I want to defend this reification, which has at least the advantage that it stops the desperate search for the lost revolutionary Subject: a loss held to be due to the prevalent integration of the working class into the capitalist system. The working class still is the “ontological” antagonist of capital, and the potentially revolutionary Subject; but it is a vastly expanded working class, which no longer corresponds directly to the Marxian proletariat.

Late capitalism has re-defined the working class: today, in the advanced countries, industrial labourers are no longer the great majority of this class. The “deproletarianization” of the working class is indicated not only in the higher standard of living, in the sphere of consumption: it is a trend rooted in the development of the production process itself, which integrates large strata of non-proletarian workers into the working class: White collar employees, technicians, engineers, and the steadily growing private and public bureaucracy which assures the creation as well as realisation of surplus value. All these have to sell their labour power and are separated from the control of the means of production. In this greatly enlarged working class, the gap between intellectual and material labour is being reduced, knowledge and education are generalized; however, these achievements are invalidated to the degree to which the system reproduces itself through the productivity of *unproductive* labour, which does not increase the social wealth, but rather destroys and abuses it through the production of waste, planned obsolescence, a self-

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propelling armament industry, management of consciousness and sub-consciousness, etc.

The capitalist mode of production, through the increasing mechanization and intellectualization of labour, accumulates an increasing quantity of general ability, skills, knowledge — a human potential which cannot be developed within the established apparatus of production, because it would conflict with the need for full-time de-humanized labour. A large part of it is channelled into unnecessary work, unnecessary in that it is not required for the construction and preservation of a better society but is necessitated only by the requirements of capitalist production.

Under these circumstances, a "counter-consciousness" emerges among the dependent population (today about 90% of the total?), an awareness of the ever more blatant obsolescence of the established social division and organization of work. Rudolf Bahro, the militant East German dissident (he was immediately jailed after the publication, in West Germany, of his book *The Alternative*) uses the term *surplus-consciousness* to designate this (still largely vague and diffused) awareness. He defines it as "the growing quantity of free mental energy which is no longer tied up in necessary labour and hierarchical knowledge" (*New Left Review*, no. 106, November-December 1977).

"*Surplus Consciousness*" does not describe an ideological entity, signifying a relapse into idealism. Rather, this strange term designates a quality of the mental energy expressed in the actual behaviour of men and women under the impact of the mode of production in late capitalism. This energy is "surplus" over and above the energy spent daily in the alienated performances required by the established production relations. Blocked in finding satisfying ways of effective realisation, it becomes, among the dependent population, consciousness of frustration, humiliation, and waste. At the same time, capitalist mass production constantly stimulates this consciousness by the display of an ever larger offer of commodities over and above the necessities (and even amenities) of life. The system is thus compelled, by the requirements of enlarged competitive accumulation, to create and to renew constantly the *needs* for "luxuries", which are all but inaccessible to those who lack the necessary purchasing power. Late capitalism invokes the images of an easier, less repressive, less inhuman life, while perpetuating the alienated labour which denies this satisfaction. In short, late capitalism daily demonstrates the fact that the wherewithal for a better society is available, but that the very society which has created these resources of freedom must preclude their use for the enhancement (and today even for the protection) of life.

In this form, the consciousness of the underlying population is penetrated by the inherent contradictions of capitalism. To be sure, their appearance does not

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correspond to their essence; surplus consciousness does not conceptualize the dynamics of late capitalist production. Nonetheless, surplus consciousness tends to become a material force, not primarily as class consciousness, but rather as the consciousness of an opposition which expresses itself in new (or recaptured) modes of action, initiated not by any specific class, but by a precarious and temporary "alliance" of groups among the dependent population. Such actions include the "citizens initiatives" (e.g., the organized protest against nuclear energy installations, against capitalist urban renewal), the fight against racism and sexism, the students' protest, etc. At the same time, workers' initiatives transcend the merely economic class struggle in the demands for the self-organization (autogestion) of work.

Under the concentrated power of corporate capitalism, its productivity and destructiveness, the opposition is effectively contained. There is no room for a radicalism which would be supported by the people, and the range of movement as well as the demands which result easily appear ideological and reformist. Is this a throwback to previous stages of bourgeois democracy?

In this situation the classical Marxist "time table" of historical revolutions gains new significance. According to this time table, a bourgeois-democratic revolution precedes the proletarian-socialist revolution. The former is to create the *pre-conditions* for the ideological, political, economic, and organizational transition to socialism (assertion and enlargement of civil rights and liberties, reduction of monopoly capital, institutionalization and extension of equality and of public services, emancipation of oppressed racial and national minorities). Today, the subjection of the majority of the bourgeoisie to the hegemony of corporate capital, and the increasingly totalitarian character of the capitalist state threaten to cancel the achievements of the revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries; they are to be recaptured and radicalized. The loss of economic power sustained by large sections of the bourgeoisie, and the intensified exploitation of the working class (old and new) make for the formation of a popular base for change. Thus, the "historic compromise", the alliance with bourgeois forces, the rejection of the "dictatorship of the proletariat" in the strategy of Eurocommunism has roots in the very structure of late capitalism. "Eurocommunism" does not aim at replacing the revolution by the vote, nor does it necessarily project features of the revolution itself. It rather claims to be a theory and praxis responding to a whole (and probably long) period during which capitalism mobilizes its entire economic, technological, and military power to make the world — its world — safe for enlarged accumulation. This implies, on the part of capital, the need to contain the class struggle within economic forms, to obtain and maintain the collaboration of the working class by dividing it into a privileged population in the advanced capitalist countries, and an underprivileged population both in

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these countries and abroad. Within the global system, the multi-national corporations keep the competitive conflicts from becoming explosive.

This overall capitalist policy is largely successful. The subjection of the petty and middle bourgeoisie to monopoly capital has not led to their "proletarianization". The material achievements of capitalism, its life-and-death power, and the apparent absence of a better alternative stabilize the system. Within the global framework, however, a vast reservoir of anti-capitalist sentiment is built up. In the developed capitalist countries, it does not result in a revolutionary movement, if by "revolutionary" we understand commitment to the mass struggle for the overthrow of the established social system.

Eurocommunism aims at articulating and winning over this large anti-capitalist (but not yet socialist) opposition outside the "proletariat". The changes are promising. One reason: the "surplus consciousness" has negated the *reification* which veiled the real mechanism of domination behind the facade of free, objective exchange relationships. Can there still be any mystification of who is governing and in whose interests, of what is the base of their power? Not only is the ideology of capitalism wearing thin (inalienable human rights? the "invisible" hand of free competition? private enterprise? equality?) — the very reality of the system no longer conceals its utter destructiveness (the proliferation of nuclear energy, the poisoning of the life environment, chronic unemployment and inflation, perfected control of the population, etc.).

To conclude: The tendency is to the Right. It meets an enlarged opposition, qualitatively weakened by internal division, and by the lack of an organization adapted to the conditions of corporate capitalism. At the same time, the global conflicts between the capitalist powers, and with the Third World tend to weaken the stabilization of the system, without, however, posing a serious threat. The life-and-death question for the Left is: Can the transformation of the corporate State into a neo-fascist State be prevented? The question, as well as the possible answers do not arise from a *revision* of Marxian theory, they are posed by Marxian theory itself!

Philosophy
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