

Marx's Conception of Socialism

MARX USUALLY REFERRED to the society he aimed to see established by the working class as "communist society". Precisely because he believed that "communist society" would be the outcome of the struggle and movement of the working class against its capitalist conditions of existence, Marx always refused to give any detailed picture of what he expected it to be like: that was something for the working class to work out for itself. Nevertheless scattered throughout his writings, published and unpublished, are references to what he believed would have to be the basic features of the new society the working class would establish in place of capitalism.

Voluntary Association

It must be emphasised that nowhere did Marx distinguish between "socialist society" and "communist society". As far as he, and Engels, were concerned these two words meant the same, being alternative names for the society they thought the working class would establish in place of capitalism, a practice which will be followed in this article. As a matter of fact besides *communist* Marx employed four other words to describe future society: *associated*, *socialised*, *collective* and *co-operative*. All these words convey a similar meaning and bring out the contrast with capitalist society where not only the ownership and control of production but life generally is private, isolated and atomized. Of these the word Marx used most frequently — almost more frequently than *communist* — was *association*. Marx wrote of future society as "an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism" (PP, p. 197) and as "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all" (CM, p. 82). In Volume III of *Capital* Marx writes three or four times of production in future society being controlled by the "associated producers" (pp. 428, 430-1 and 800). *Association* was a word used in working class circles in England to mean a voluntary union of workers to overcome the effects of competition. This was Marx's sense too: in future society the producers would voluntarily co-operate to further their own common interest; they would cease to be "the working class" and become a classless community.

No Coercive State

In these circumstances the State as an instrument of political rule over people would have no place. Such a social organ of coercion was, in Marx's view, only needed in class-divided societies as an instrument of class rule and to contain class struggles. As he put it, in socialist society "there will be no more political power properly so-called since political power is precisely the official expression of antagonism in civil society" (PP, p. 197) and "the public power will lose its political character. Political power, properly so called, is merely

the organised power of one class for oppressing another" (CM, p. 81).

Socialist society would indeed need a central administration but this would not be a "State" or "government" in that it would not have at its disposal any means of coercing people, but would be concerned purely with administering social affairs under democratic control. Marx endorsed the proposal of Saint Simon and other early critics of capitalism for "the conversion of the functions of the State into a mere superintendence of production" (CM, p. 98), and also declared that "freedom consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it" (CGP, p. 32). In other words, once Socialism had been established and classes abolished, the coercive and undemocratic features of the State machine would have been removed, leaving only purely administrative functions mainly in the field of the planning and organization of production.

Common Ownership

Natural resources and the man-made instruments of production would be held in common: Marx speaks of "a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common" (Vol. I, p. 78) and, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, of "the co-operative society based on the common ownership of the means of production" (p. 22) and of "the material conditions of production" being "the co-operative property of the workers themselves" (p. 25). It is significant that Marx never defined communist society in terms of the ownership and control of the means of production by the State, but rather in terms of ownership and control by a voluntary association of the producers themselves. He did not equate what is now called "nationalisation" with Socialism.

Planned Production

Another feature of communist society, in Marx's view, would be consciously planned production. He writes of a society "in which producers regulate their production according to a preconceived plan" (Vol. III, p. 256) and of "production by freely associated men . . . consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan" (Vol. I, p. 80).

Conscious planning, conscious control over the material conditions of life, was for Marx clearly the essence of Socialism. In the 1840's, when he used to express himself philosophically, Marx was continually emphasising this point. This was what he meant when he said that real history would not begin till Socialism had been established; human beings were not behaving as human beings so long as they were controlled by blind historical and economic forces, ultimately of their own creation but unrecognized as such; Socialism would allow men to consciously regulate their relationship with Nature; only such a consciously planned society was

a truly human society, a society compatible with human nature.

But Marx's approach to planning in Socialism was not just philosophical. It was practical too. He was well aware that to regulate "production according to a preconceived plan" would be a huge organizational task. Indeed, that it would be, if you like, *the* economic problem of Socialism. Matching production with social wants would in the first instance be a huge statistical exercise. Marx emphasised that for this sort of reason "book-keeping" would be more necessary in Socialism than under capitalism — not that he envisages the books in socialist society being kept in money. Socialist society, he felt, would use some direct measure of labour-time for its statistics and planning (Vol. III, pp. 184 and 830). Calculations would have to be made of how much labour-time would be needed to produce particular items of wealth; the real social (as opposed to monetary market) demand for the various items of wealth would also have to be calculated; and all the figures put together to construct a definite plan for the allocation of resources and labour to the various different branches of production.

In a number of places Marx compares how capitalism and Socialism would tackle the same problems, for instance a long-term project which would not bear fruit in the form of finished products for some years but which in the meantime would have to be allocated labour and resources. Under capitalism, said Marx, this creates monetary problems and upsets; but in Socialism it is only a question of "preconceived" planning, of making allowances for this beforehand (Vol. II, pp. 315 and 358). Similarly with miscalculations, say over-producing: under capitalism (where overproduction means in relation to market demand) this causes a crisis and a drop in production; in Socialism (where overproduction would be in relation to real social demand) there would be no problem: it could be corrected in the next plan (Vol. II, pp. 468-9).

In his *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (p. 22) and in Volume III of *Capital* (p. 854) Marx lists the various major uses to which the social product would have to be put in a socialist society:

- 1) Replacing the means of production (raw materials, wear and tear of machinery, etc.) used up in producing the social product.
- 2) Expanding the means of production so as to be able to produce a larger social product.
- 3) A small surplus as a reserve to provide against accidents and natural disasters (and planning miscalculations, we might add).
- 4) The individual consumption of the actual producers.
- 5) The individual consumption of those unable to work: the young, the old, the sick.
- 6) Social consumption: schools, hospitals, parks, libraries, etc.
- 7) Social administration not connected with production.

This is obvious of course but it is as well to spell it out so as to show that Marx did discuss some of the practical problems of totally planned production.

Abolition of the Market

Socialist society, as Marx repeatedly made clear, would be a non-market society, with all that that implied:

no money, no buying and selling, no wages, etc. In fact it was his view that proper planning and the market are incompatible: *either* production is regulated by a conscious previously worked-out plan or it is regulated, directly or indirectly, by the market. When Marx talked about men under capitalism being dominated by blind forces, which were in the end their own creations, it was precisely blind market forces he mainly had in mind. For him capitalism was essentially a market economy in which the allocation of labour and resources to the various branches of production was determined by what he called "the law of value". Although production under capitalism was not consciously controlled, it was not completely anarchic: some sort of order was imposed by the fact that goods exchanged in definite proportions, related both to the amount of socially necessary labour-time spent in producing them and to the average rate of profit on invested capital. Under capitalism it was the averaging of the rate of profit on the capital invested in the different branches that regulated production. But this was an unplanned hit-and-miss process which was only accurate in the long run; in the short run it led to alternating periods of boom and slump, labour shortage and mass unemployment, high profits and low profits. The assertion by society of conscious control over production, and the allocation of resources to the various branches of production in accordance with a previously settled plan, necessarily meant for Marx the disappearance not only of production for profit, but also of the whole mechanism of the market (including the labour market, and so of the wages system), of production for the market ("commodity-production"), of buying and selling ("exchange") and of money.

The *Communist Manifesto* specifically speaks of "the Communistic abolition of buying and selling" (p. 72) and of the abolition not only of capital (wealth used to produce other wealth with a view to profit) but of wage labour too (p. 73). In Volume I Marx speaks of "directly associated labour, a form of production that is entirely inconsistent with the production of commodities . . ." (p. 94) and in Volume III of things being different "if production were collective and no longer possessed the form of commodity production . . ." (p. 451). Also, in Volume II, Marx in comparing how Socialism and capitalism would deal with a particular problem twice says there would be no money to complicate matters in socialist society: "If we conceive society as being not capitalistic but communistic, there will be no money-capital at all in the first place . . ." (p. 315) and "in the case of socialized production the money-capital is eliminated" (p. 358). In other words, in Socialism it is solely a question of planning and organisation. Marx also advised trade unionists to adopt the revolutionary watchword "Abolition of the Wages System" (VPP, p. 78) and, in his *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, stated "within the co-operative society based on the common ownership of the means of production, the producers do not exchange their products" (pp. 22-3) for the simple reason that their work would then be social not individual and applied as part of a definite plan. What they produce belongs to them collectively, i.e. to society, as soon as it is produced; socialist society then allocates, again in accord-

ance with a plan, the social product to various previously-agreed uses.

Distribution of Consumer Goods

One of these uses must be individual consumption. How did Marx think this would be organised? Here again Marx took a realistic view. Eventually, he said, the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs” would apply (CGP, p. 24). In other words, there would be no social restrictions on individual consumption, every member of society being free to take from the common stock of consumer goods according to their individual need. But Marx knew that this presupposed a higher level of productivity than prevailed in his day (he was writing in 1875). In the meantime, while the productive forces were being expanded, individual consumption would unavoidably have to be restricted. How? Marx made the simple point that how wealth would be allocated for individual consumption in communist society would depend on what and how much there was to allocate: “The mode of this distribution will vary with the productive organisation of the community, and the degree of historical development attained by the producers” (Vol. I, p. 78). This was another obvious point, but on three or four occasions Marx went further and referred to a specific method of regulating distribution: by “labour-time vouchers”. The basic idea of such a system is that each producer would be given a certificate recording how much time he had spent at work; this would entitle him to draw from the common store of wealth set aside for individual consumption an equivalent amount of consumer goods, likewise measured in labour-time. This, as Marx himself recognised, was only one of many possible systems Socialist society could democratically agree on for allocating wealth for individual consumption in the temporary conditions of relative scarcity here assumed — realistically for 1875 — to exist. As long as the total number of vouchers issued matched the total amount of wealth set aside for individual consumption, society could adopt any criteria it chose for deciding how many vouchers particular individuals, or groups of individuals, should have; this need bear no relationship at all to how many hours an individual may or may not have worked. Similarly, the “pseudo-prices” given to particular goods to be distributed need bear no relation to the amount of labour-time spent on producing them. Marx himself described some of the defects of the *labour-time* voucher system, but also made the point that any voucher system of allocating goods for individual consumption would suffer from anomalies, being forced on socialist society by the not-yet-developed-enough productive forces in what he called “the first phase of communist society”.

When Marx mentions labour-time vouchers in *Capital* he always made it quite clear that he was only assuming such a system as an example: “merely for the sake of a parallel with the production of commodities” (Vol. I, p. 78) or that the producers “may, for all it matters, . . .” (Vol. II, p. 358) receive labour-time vouchers. He also emphasised that these vouchers would not be money in its proper sense: “Owen’s ‘labour-money’ . . . is no more ‘money’ than a ticket to the theatre” (Vol. I, p. 94)

and “these vouchers are not money. They do not circulate” (Vol. II, p. 358). (See also his discussion of so called “labour-money” in *The Critique of Political Economy*, pp. 83-6.)

Marx’s point here is that the vouchers would merely be pieces of paper entitling people to take such and such an amount of consumer goods; they would not be tokens for gold like today’s paper money; once handed over they would be cancelled and so could not circulate. Besides, they would be issued as part of the overall plan for the production and distribution of wealth. Finally, we repeat, any voucher system, whether on a labour-time or some other basis, was seen by Marx only as a temporary measure while the productive forces were developed as rapidly as possible to the level where they would permit socialist society to go over to free access according to individual need.

This is why this is now only an academic problem. The further development of the forces of production since Marx’s day has meant that the system he always said was the final aim of Socialism — free access to consumer goods according to individual need — could now be introduced almost immediately. Socialism was established. The problem Marx envisaged labour-time vouchers as a possible solution to no longer really exists.

Conclusion

We have seen, then, that Marx held that future communist society would be a classless community, without any coercive State machine, based on the common ownership of the means of production, with planning to serve human welfare completely replacing production for profit, the market economy, money and the wages system — even in the early stages when it might not prove possible to implement the principle “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need”, which, however, always remained for Marx the aim. Marx, and Engels, never drew any distinction between “socialist” and “communist” society, using these (and other) terms interchangeably. He did, however, believe that this society would only be established after a “period of . . . revolutionary transformation” (CGP, p. 32) of a number of years duration during which the working class would be using its control of political power to dispossess the capitalists and bring all the means of production under democratic social control — but, here again, the further development of the productive forces since Marx’s day means that the socialist revolution can now be carried through very quickly with no need for any lengthy period between the capture of political power by the working class and the establishment of socialism.

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The Socialist Party of Great Britain

OBJECT

The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.

DECLARATION OF PRINCIPLES

The Socialist Party of Great Britain holds:

1] That Society as at present constituted is based upon the ownership of the means of living (i.e. land, factories, railways, etc.) by the capitalist or master class, and the consequent enslavement of the working class, by whose labour alone wealth is produced.

2] That in society, therefore, there is an antagonism of interests, manifesting itself as a class struggle, between those who possess but do not produce, and those who produce but do not possess.

3] That this antagonism can be abolished only by the emancipation of the working class from the domination of the master class, by the conversion into the common property of society of the means of production and distribution, and their democratic control by the whole people.

4] That as in the order of social evolution the working class is the last class to achieve its freedom the emancipation of the working class will involve the emancipation of all mankind without distinction of race or sex.

5] That this emancipation must be the work of the working class itself.

6] That as the machinery of government, including the armed forces of the nation, exists only to conserve the monopoly by the capitalist class of the wealth taken from the workers, the working class must organise consciously and politically for the conquest of the powers of government, national and local, in order that this machinery, including these forces, may be converted from an instrument of oppression into the agent of emancipation and the overthrow of privilege, aristocratic and plutocratic.

7] That as all political parties are but the expression of class interests, and as the interest of the working class is diametrically opposed to the interests of all sections of the master class, the party seeking working-class emancipation must be hostile to every other party.

8] The Socialist Party of Great Britain, therefore, enters the field of political action, determined to wage war against all other political parties, whether alleged labour or avowedly capitalist, and calls upon the members of the working class of this country to muster under its banner to the end that a speedy termination may be wrought to the system which deprives them of the fruits of their labour, and that poverty may give place to comfort, privilege to equality, and slavery to freedom.

Anyone agreeing with the above principles and wishing to join should apply to nearest branch or to Head Office.

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THE SOCIALIST PARTY of Great Britain stands for a moneyless world community, without frontiers, based on common ownership and democratic control, with production solely for use not profit.

THE SOCIALIST PARTY opposes all wars, all racialism, all leaders, all governments (including the state capitalist regimes in Russia, China, Yugoslavia, Cuba and such places).

THE SOCIALIST PARTY holds that world Socialism can only be established by the united conscious democratic political action of the immense majority of working people in the industrialised parts of the world.

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