

RE-EXAMINATION  
OF THE CONCEPT OF REVOLUTION<sup>1</sup>

The concept of revolution in Marxian theory telescopes an entire historical period: the final stage of capitalism; the transitional period of proletarian dictatorship, and the initial stage of socialism. It is in a strict sense a historical concept, projecting actual tendencies in the society; and it is a dialectical concept, projecting the counter-tendencies within the respective historical period, in as much as they are inherent in this period. These tendencies and counter-tendencies are manifestations of which Marxian theory and practice themselves are essential elements. Marxian theory itself is a power in the historical struggle, and to the degree to which its concepts, "translated" into practice, become forces of resistance, change and reconstruction; they are subject to the vicissitudes of this struggle, which they reflect and comprehend, but do not dominate. "Re-examination" is therefore an element of the concept of revolution, part of its internal development.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written before the May-June events in France. I have added only a few lines to indicate their historical significance.

## *Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution*

This paper can raise only some of the problems involved in such a re-examination. I shall start with a brief recapitulation of the Marxian concepts. The revolution is:

1) a socialist revolution, overthrowing the capitalist system, introducing collective ownership of the means of production, and control by the “immediate producers”;

2) it initiates in the advanced industrial society (because of the magnitude of the internal contradictions at this stage of capitalism, and because of the possible realization of the socialist principle “to each according to his needs”); the shortening of the first phase is essential, otherwise repression would be perpetuated.

3) The revolution is to occur in an economic crisis, which weakens the established state apparatus;

4) it is to be carried out by large-scale (organized) mass action of the working class, leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat as a transitory stage.

The concept contains the following democratic presuppositions:

a) the revolution is a majority affair; and

b) democracy offers the most favorable conditions for organization and for education to class consciousness.

This presupposition underlines the importance of the “subjective factor”: awareness of the facts of exploitation, and of the ways to undo them; experience of intolerable conditions and of the vital need for change are pre-conditions of the revolution.

But the Marxian concept of revolution also implies continuity in change: development of the productive forces contained by capitalism, taking over of the technology and of the technical apparatus by the new producers.

What is at stake in the re-examination is not only the identification and enumeration of those presuppositions invalidated by the actual development, but also the concept of the revolution *as a whole*, because all its elements are interrelated. This involves a re-examination of the Marxian concept of the structural relation between capitalism and socialism under the following aspects:

1) The problem of “transition:” socialism in coexistence with, or as successor (heir) to capitalism;

2) The “*redefinition*” of socialism, in accordance with the new historical stage of the global development: namely, what is the *qualitative difference* of socialism as definite negation of capitalism?

The scope of this re-examination is *defined by Marxian theory itself*, i.e., by the inherent necessity to unfold the dialectical intent of its concepts in the analysis of the social reality. To the degree to which corporate capitalism is different from the previous stages of capitalism, which guided the Marxian concept, and to the degree to which the development of capitalism has “deflected” that of socialism, and vice versa, the concept of revolution will be a “new” concept.

But, inasmuch as the stage reached by capitalism and socialism is the result of the economic and political forces which determined the preceding stages, the new concept will be the internal development of the old one.

The following sections merely propose some guidelines for the elaboration of the new concept.

Perhaps the most general aspect of the re-examination is the *change in the theoretical framework*, reflecting the *change in*, and the *extension of the social basis for the potential revolution*, or for the possible containment and defeat of the revolution.

This theoretical framework—and that of the subversive activity—has become a *global* one: no concept, no action, no strategy which does not have to be projected and evaluated, as element and chance and choice in the international constellation. Just as Vietnam is an integral part of the system of corporate capitalism, so are the national liberation movements an integral part of the potential socialist revolution. And, the liberation movements in the Third World depend, for their subversive power, on the internal weakening of the capitalist metropolises.

It may be objected that Marxian theory has always been “international,” also on the organizational level. True, but this “internationalism” was orientated on the industrial working classes as a counterforce within industrial capitalism, today, they are not a subversive force. Marxian theory paid attention to the peoples in the colonial and backward areas, but they appeared mainly as adjunct, ally, “*réservoir*” (Lenin’s term) for the primary historical agent of revolution. The Third World obtained full theoretical

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and strategic recognition only in the wake of the Second World War, but then the pendulum swung to the other extreme. Today there is a strong tendency to regard the national liberation movements as the principal, if not as the sole revolutionary force, or a (seemingly opposite) tendency to impose upon these movements the theoretical and organizational pattern elaborated for, and applied to, the strategy in metropolitan areas (i.e., city-based leadership; centralized party control; alliances with groups of the national bourgeoisie; coalitions).

In reality, the global situation militates against a mechanistic division into the Third World and the others. Rather we are confronted with a *tripartite division* of historical forces *which cut across the division into the First, Second, and Third World*. The contest between capitalism and socialism divides the Third World too and, as a new historical force, there appears what may be called (and what is thus called by the New Left) an alternative to the capitalist as well as to the established socialist societies, namely, the struggle for a different way of socialist construction, a construction “from below”, but from a “new below” not integrated into the value system of the old societies—a socialism of cooperation and solidarity, where men and women determine collectively their needs and goals, their priorities, and the method and pace of “modernization.”

And this potential alternative (the chance of avoiding the indefinitely extended “first phase”, the chance of breaking the continuum of repression and domination) has sparked and intensified the radical opposition in the advanced industrial countries (East and West), and especially in the center of the capitalist empire. This opposition may well be the catalyst of change. The Marxian concept is geared to the development in the advanced capitalist countries, and, in spite of the apparent evidence to the contrary, the fate of the revolution (as global revolution) may well be decided in the metropolises. Only if the strongest link in the chain becomes the weaker link can the liberation movements gain the momentum of a global revolutionary force.

The *character of the opposition* in the center of corporate capitalism is concentrated in the two opposite poles of the society: in the ghetto population (itself not homogeneous), and in the middle-class intelligentsia, especially among the students.

Common to these different and even conflicting groups is the total character of the refusal and rebellion:

1) Insistence on a break with the continuity of domination and exploitation—no matter in what name, insistence not only on new institutions, but on self-determination.

2) Distrust of all ideologies, including socialism made into an ideology.

3) Rejection of the pseudo-democratic process sustaining the dominion of corporate capitalism.

This “unorthodox” character of the opposition is itself expressive of the structure of corporate capitalism (the “integration” of the majority of the underlying population). Neither of the two oppositional groups constitutes the “human basis” of the social process of production—for Marx a decisive condition for the historical agent of the revolution.

They do not make up the majority of the population.

They are faced with hostility (and resentment) among organized labor (still the human basis of capitalist production and the source of surplus value, and therefore still the potential agent of a possible revolution) and they are not effectively organized, neither on the national nor on the international level.

By itself, this opposition cannot be regarded as agent of radical change; it can become such an agent only if it is supported by a working class which is no longer the prisoner of its own integration and of a bureaucratic trade union and party apparatus supporting this integration. If this alliance between the new opposition and the working classes does not materialize, the latter may well become, in part at least, the mass basis of a neo-fascist regime.

Conclusion: the *Marxian concept of a revolution* carried by the majority of the exploited masses, culminating in the “seizure of power” and in the setting up of a proletarian dictatorship which initiates socialization, is “overtaken” by the historical development: it pertains to a stage of capitalist productivity and organization which has been overtaken; it does not project the higher stage of capitalist productivity, including the productivity of destruction, and the terrifying concentration of the instruments of annihilation and of indoctrination in the hands of the powers that be.

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However, this “invalidation” of the Marxian concept is an authentic and accurate *Aufhebung*; the truth of the concept is preserved and reaffirmed on the level actually attained by the historical development. The revolutionary proletariat becomes an agent of change where it still is the human basis of the social process of production, namely, in the predominantly agrarian areas of the Third World, where it provides the popular support for the national liberation fronts.

And these areas, and these forces are not external to the capitalist system. They are an essential part of its global space of exploitation, they are areas and forces which this system cannot allow to go and shift into that other orbit (of socialism or communism), because it can survive only if its expansion is not blocked by any superior power. The National Liberation movements are expressive of the *internal contradictions* of the global capitalist system.

But precisely because of this relation between the revolutions abroad and the metropolises, the fateful link persists between the prospects of the Liberation movements and the prospects of radical change in the metropolises. The “negating” forces abroad must be “*synchronized*” with those at home, and this synchronization can never be the result of organization alone, it must have its *objective basis* in the economic and political process of corporate capitalism. These objective factors announce themselves in the strains and stresses of the corporate economy:

- 1) The necessity of competition, and the threat of progressive automation, with the ensuing unemployment, demand ever enlarged absorption of labor by nonproductive, parasitarian jobs and services.

- 2) The costs of neo-colonial wars, or controls over corrupt dictatorships, increase more and more.

- 3) As a result of the increasing reduction of human labor power in the process of production, the margin of profit declines.

- 4) Society requires the creation of needs, the satisfaction of which tends to conflict with the morale and discipline necessary for work under capitalism. The realm of necessity is invaded by the non-necessary, gadgets and luxury devices exist side by side with continuing poverty and misery, “luxuries” become necessities in the competitive struggle for existence.

If these tendencies continue to operate, the evermore blatant contradiction between the vast social wealth and its wasteful and destructive use, between the potential of freedom and the actuality of repression, between the possible abolition of alienated labor and the capitalist need to sustain it, may well lead to a gradual dysfunction of the society, a decline of the morale which normally assures the day-to-day performance and the compliance with the required pattern of behavior, at work and at leisure. This may awaken the consciousness of the use of technical progress as instrument of domination.

The events of May and June in France have shown to what extent these tensions in the established society can loosen the grip of capitalist and trade union integration, and promote the alliance between working class groups and the militant intelligentsia.

The concept of revolution must take into account this eventuality of the diffuse, apparently "spontaneous," disintegration of the system, the general loosening of its cohesion,—an expression of the objective obsolescence of alienated labor, of the pressure for the liberation of man from his function as agent (and servant) of the process of production: the revolution may be seen as a crisis of the system in "affluence" and superfluity.

In such a crisis, the historical agents of change would emerge—and they would not be identical with any of the traditional classes. But the "qualification" of these agents can be gauged if we recall the perhaps most decisive element in the Marxian concept, namely, that the historical subject of revolution must be the "definite negation" also in the sense that this subject is a social class free from, that is, not contaminated by the exploitative needs and interests of man under capitalism, that it is the subject of essentially different, "humanistic" needs and values.

This is the notion of the rupture with the continuum of domination, the qualitative difference of socialism as a new form and way of life, not only rational development of the productive forces, but also the redirection of progress toward the ending of the competitive struggle for existence, not only abolition of poverty and toil, but also reconstruction of the social and natural environment as a peaceful, beautiful universe:—*total transvaluation of values, transformation of needs and goals*. This implies

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*still another change in the concept of revolution*, a break with the continuity of the technical apparatus of productivity which, for Marx, would extend (freed from capitalist abuse) to the socialist society. Such “*technological*” continuity would constitute a *fateful link between capitalism and socialism*, because this technical apparatus has, in its very structure and scope, become an apparatus of control and domination. *Cutting this link* would mean, not to regress in the technical progress, but to reconstruct the technical apparatus in accordance with the needs of free men, guided by their own consciousness and sensibility, by their autonomy. This autonomy would call for a decentralized apparatus of rational control on a reduced basis—reduced because no longer inflated by the requirements of exploitation, aggressive expansion, and competition, held together by *solidarity* in cooperation.

Now is *this apparently “utopian” notion applicable to existing social and political forces*, which could thus be regarded as agents of qualitative change?

The Marxian concept of revolution is neither a utopian nor a romantic concept, it insists on the real basis of power, on the objective and subjective factors which can alone elevate the idea of qualitative change above the level of wishful thinking, and this basis is still in the advanced industrial countries.

In the capitalist countries, the force of the alternative appears today only in the “marginal” groups mentioned above: the opposition among the intelligentsia, especially the students, and among the politically articulate and active groups among the working classes.

Both reject not only the system as a whole and any transformation of the system “within the existing structures”; they also profess their adherence to a new and qualitatively different system of values and aspirations.

The weakness of these groups is expressive of the new historical constellation which defines the concept of the revolution:

- 1) against the majority of the integrated population, including that of the “immediate producers”;
- 2) against a well-functioning, prosperous society, which is neither in a revolutionary nor a pre-revolutionary situation.



In accord with this situation, the role of this opposition is a strictly preparatory one: their task is radical enlightenment, in theory and by practice, and the development of cadres and nuclei for the struggle against the global structure of capitalism.

For it is precisely in its global structure where the internal contradictions assert themselves: in the sustained resistance against neo-colonial domination; in the emergence of new powerful efforts to construct a qualitatively different society in Cuba, in China's cultural revolution; and, last but not least, in the more or less "peaceful" coexistence with the Soviet Union. Here too, the dynamic of two antagonistic tendencies:

- 1) the common interest of the "have-nations" in the face of international upheavals in the precarious balance of power,
- 2) the conflicting interests of different social systems, both securing and defending their respective political and strategic orbits.

### *Conclusion*

The Marxian concept of revolution must comprehend the changes in the scope and social structure of advanced capitalism, and the new forms of the contradictions characteristic of the latest stage of capitalism in its global framework. The modifications of the Marxian concept then appear, not as extraneous additions or adjustments, but rather as the elaboration of Marxian theory itself.

One aspect, however, seems to be incompatible with this interpretation. There is in Marx a strain that may be called a rationalistic, even positivistic prejudice, namely, his belief in the inexorable necessity of the transition to a "higher stage of human development," and in the final success of this transition. Although Marx was much aware of the possibility of failure, defeat, or betrayal, the alternative "*socialism or barbarism*" was not an integral part of his concept of revolution. It must become such a part: the subordination of man to the instruments of his labor, to the total, overwhelming apparatus of production and destruction, has reached the point of an all but uncontrollable power: objectified, *verdinglicht* behind the technological veil, and

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behind the mobilized national interest, this power seems to be self-propelling, and to carry the indoctrinated and integrated people along. It may strike the fatal blow before the counterforces are strong enough to prevent it: an explosion of the internal contradiction which would make a re-examination of the concept of revolution a merely abstract and speculative undertaking. The awareness of this possibility should strengthen and solidify the opposition in all its manifestations—it is the only hope.