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Marxist Theory

1990 - Communism

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive -

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The term 'communism' was first used in modern times to designate a specific economic doctrine (or regime), and a political creed intending to introduce such a regime, by the French lawyer Étienne Cabet in the late 1830s; his works, especially the utopia L'Icarie, were influential among the Paris working class before the revolution of 1848.

[<https://internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/communism.jpg>]

In 1840 the first 'communist banquet' was held in Paris - banquets and banquet speeches were a common form of political protest under the July monarchy.

The term spread rapidly, so that Karl Marx could entitle one of his first political articles of 16 October 1842 'Der Kommunismus und die Augsburger Allgemeine Zeitung'. He noted that 'communism' was already an international movement, manifesting itself in Britain and Germany besides France, and traced its origin to Plato. He could have mentioned ancient Jewish sects and early Christian monasteries too.

In fact, some of the so-called 'utopian socialists', in the first place the German Weitling, called themselves communists and spread the influence of the new doctrine among German itinerant handicraftsmen all over Europe, as well as among the more settled industrial workers of the Rhineland. Under the influence of Marx and Engels, the League of the Just (Bund des Gerechten) they had created, changed its name to the Communist League in 1846. The League requested the two young German authors to draft a declaration of principle for their organisation. This declaration would appear in February 1848 under the title Communist Manifesto, which would make the words 'communism' and 'communists' famous the world over.

Communism, from then on, would designate both a classes society without property, without ownership - either private or nationalised - of the means of production, without commodity production, money or a state apparatus separate and apart from the members of the community, and the social-political movement to arrive at that society. After the victory of the Russian October revolution in 1917, that movement would tend to be identified by and large with Communist parties and a Communist International (or at least an 'international communist movement'), though there exists a tiny minority of communists, inspired by the Dutch astronomer Pannekoek- who are hostile to a party organisation of any kind (the so-called 'council communists', Rätekommunisten).

The first attempts to arrive at a communist society (leaving aside early, medieval and more modern christian communities) were made in the United States in the 19th century, through the establishment of small agrarian settlements based upon collective property, communally organised labour and the total absence of money inside their boundaries. From that point of view, they differed radically from the production co-operatives promoted for example by the English industrialist and philanthropist Robert Owen. Weitling himself created such a community, significantly called Communia. Although they were generally established by a selected group of followers who shared common convictions and interests, these agrarian communities did not survive long in a hostile environment. The nearest contemporary extension of these early communist settlements are the kibbutzim in Israel.

Rather rapidly, and certainly after the appearance of the Communist Manifesto, communism came to be associated less with small communities set up by morally or intellectually selected elites, but with the general movement of emancipation of the modern working class, if not in its totality at least in its majority, encompassing furthermore the main countries (wealth-wise and population-wise) of the world. In the major theoretical treatise of their younger years, The German Ideology, Marx and Engels stated emphatically:

“Empirically, communism is only possible as the act of dominant peoples 'all at once' and simultaneously, which presupposes the universal development of productive forces and the world intercourse bound up with them. . . . The proletariat can thus only exist world-historically, just as communism, its activity, can only have a 'world-historical' existence.”

And, earlier in the same passage:

“This development of productive forces (which at the same time implies the actual empirical existence of men in their world-historical, instead of local, being) is an absolutely necessary practical premise, because without it privation is merely made general, and with want the struggle for necessities would begin again, and all the old filthy business would necessarily be restored . . . (1845-6, p. 49).”

That line of argument is today repeated by most orthodox Marxists (communists), who find in it an explanation of what 'went wrong' in Soviet Russia, once it was isolated in a capital environment as a result of the defeat of revolution in other European countries in the 1918-23 period. But many 'official' Communist Parties still stick to Stalin's particular version of communism, according to which it is possible to successfully complete the building of socialism and communism in a single country, or in a small number of countries.

The radical and international definition of a communist society given by Marx and Engels inevitably leads to the perspective of a transition (transition period) between capitalism and communism. Marx and Engels first, notably in their writings about the Paris Commune - The Civil War in France - and in their Critique of the Gotha Programme (of the German social-democratic party), Lenin later - especially in his book State and Revolution - tried to give at least a general sketch of what that transition would be like. It centres around the following ideas:

? The proletariat, as the only social class radically opposed to private ownership of the means of production, and likewise as the only class which has potentially the power to paralyse and overthrow bourgeois society, as well as the inclination to collective co-operation and solidarity which are the motive forces of the building of communism, conquers political (state) power. It uses that power ('the dictatorship of the proletariat') to make more and more 'despotic inroads' into the realm of private property and private production, substituting for them collectively and consciously (planned) organised output, increasingly turned towards direct satisfaction of needs. This implies a gradual withering away of market economy.

? The dictatorship of the proletariat, however, being the instrument of the majority to hold down a minority, does not need a heavy apparatus of full-time functionaries, and certainly no heavy apparatus of repression. It is a state sui generis, a state which starts to wither away from its inception, i.e. it starts to devolve more and more of the traditional state functions to self-administrating bodies of citizens, to society in its totality. This withering away of the state goes hand in hand with the indicated withering away of commodity production and of money, accompanying a general withering away of social classes and social stratification, i.e. of the division of society between administrators and administrated, between 'bosses' and 'bossed over' people.

That vision of transition towards communism as an essentially evolutionary process obviously has preconditions: that the countries engaged on that road already enjoy a relatively high level of development (industrialisation, modernisation, material wealth, stock of infrastructure, level of skill and culture of the people, etc.), created by capitalism itself; that the building of the new society is supported by the majority of the population (i.e. that the wage-earners already represent the great majority of the producers and that they have passed the threshold of a necessary level of socialist political class consciousness); that the process encompasses the major countries of the world.

Marx, Engels, Lenin and their main disciples and co-thinkers like Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Gramsci, Otto Bauer, Rudolf Hilferding, Bukharin et al. - incidentally also Stalin until 1928 - distinguished successive stages of the communist society: the lower stage, generally called 'socialism', in which there would be neither commodity production nor classes, but in which the individual's access to the consumption fund would still be strictly measured by his quantitative labour input, evaluated in hours of labour; and a higher stage, generally called 'communism', in which the principle of satisfaction of needs for everyone would apply, independently of any exact measurement of work performed.

Marx established that basic difference between the two stages of communism in his Critique of the Gotha Programme, together with so much else. It was also elaborated at length in Lenin's State and Revolution.

In the light of these principles, it is clear that no socialist or communist society exists anywhere in the world today. It is only possible to speak about 'really existing socialism' at present, if one introduces a new, 'reductionist' definition of a socialist society, as being only identical with predominantly nationalised property of the means of production and central economic planning. This is obviously different from the definition of socialism in the classical Marxist scriptures. Whether such a new definition is legitimate or not in the light of historical experience is a matter of political and philosophical judgement. It is in any case another matter altogether than ascertaining whether the radical emancipators goals projected by the founders of contemporary communism have been realised in these really existing societies or not. This is obviously not the case.

*From J. Eatwell, M. Milgate & P. Newman (eds.), **The New Palgrave: A Dictionary of Economics**, London 1990, pp.512-513.*