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Lessons of the Russian Revolution: Workers' Revolutions are Different from Capitalist Revolutions

The Danger of Substitutionism

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The following is based on my notes for a panel presentation. I was invited to give it at the April 8, 2017, convention of the Platypus Association, a rather academic Marxist organization.

The panel topic was on the meaning of the 1917 Russian Revolution for today. This is a topic widely discussed on the Left this year, the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. I was to express the minority viewpoint of an anarchist (antiauthoritarian socialist). However, a rainstorm and a flight cancellation intervened and I did not give the presentation. This is more-or-less what I was going to say.

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Eventually this system collapsed. In both the former Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, the statized economy was drastically modified. It became an openly market-based system, with stocks and bonds and billionaire oligarchs, even if still heavily intermixed with the national state. It transformed from one version of capitalism into another. The collective bureaucracy turned out to be a substitute not for the working class but for the traditional bourgeoisie.

“The emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.”

—First rule of the First International.

The main lesson of the Russian Revolution is that it is the workers and oppressed who must make and sustain the revolution. If they won't, then there won't be a revolution. A minority among the workers may advocate a revolutionary program and fight against various elitist trends, such as reformists, Stalinists, or fascists. But the revolutionary minority must not seek to take power for itself, to set up its own state, over and above the rest of the population—for their own good, which the revolutionaries think they know better than anyone else. Substitutions is tendency which goes back to Marx, in certain ways. The Bolsheviks did not understand its danger, before, during, or after the revolution. Instead of a new world of freedom, they founded a new authoritarianism.

In the developing radicalization of today, radicals must be aware of this danger.

There were dissident Trotskyists and other Marxists who rejected this argument, holding that the Soviet Union was an exploitative class society, either state capitalist or a new type (“bureaucratic collectivism”). This was good as far as it went. But even these almost all supported the police state of Lenin and Trotsky as a good (if imperfect) workers’ state. And generally they regarded the post-Lenin Soviet Union as remaining a (distorted) workers’ state during the early years of Stalin, even if one that should have been overthrown. They held that Stalinist Russia remained a workers’ state until some turning point—such as 1929 (the big industrialization drive) or 1934 (the great purges and mock trials). So even these unorthodox Trotskyists and others accepted substitutionism.

The nationalized, collectivized, and planned economy...never worked well. The central planners lacked feedback from below, due to the lack of workers’ democracy or democratic consumers’ cooperatives. The five-year plans were never “fulfilled.” Although the ruling bureaucracy did not hold stocks like the traditional capitalists (the bourgeoisie), the economy inevitably adopted capitalist mechanisms and acted as a statified, distorted form of capitalism. The workers’ sold their labor power to the bosses for money on a labor market. They produced goods which were sold as commodities on a market for money. The commodities they produced were worth more than the wages they received (that is, they produced surplus value, the basis of profit). State enterprises bought and sold machinery and supplies among each other, for money—so these were also commodities. Collective farms sold their food as commodities on the markets. The inefficiencies of the system were smoothed over through vast gray and black markets. Under the overall umbrella of the state, enterprises competed with each other. The enterprises, and the economy as a whole, was driven by a need for accumulation of capital. This was partly due to the whole system’s competition on the world market as well as its military arms competition with other states.

Revolutionaries study revolutions. Many lessons might be learned from looking at the 1917 Russian Revolution and its aftermath. It began with such promise, bringing hope of a world without war, oppression, capitalism, imperialism, and states. How did it result in Stalinist mass murder and state capitalism, finally to collapse back into traditional capitalism?

Possibly the most important lesson of the Russian Revolution is the difference between capitalist revolutions and working class revolutions. By “capitalist revolutions,” I mean the upheavals which replaced medieval-feudal societies with bourgeois-democratic societies, including the English Revolution of Cromwell, the American Revolution, the great French Revolution, and the mostly failed 1848 European Revolutions. By “working class revolutions”, I mean mass rebellions in which the working class plays a major role, in alliance with other exploited and oppressed sections of society—to replace capitalism with the beginning of some sort of cooperative, non-profit, system.

Today many people on the Left, including Marxists and anarchists, have given up the goal of working class revolution. Yet working class revolution was the central concept of the Marxism of Marx and Engels, as it was of the historical mainstream of socialist-anarchism, from Bakunin to Kropotkin to the anarchist-communists and anarchist-syndicalists.

Depending on the definition we use, the working class (proletarians) is either a large minority or the big majority of the population of all industrialized countries. As such, they overlap with all other oppressed sectors of the people, including women, LGBT people, people of color, immigrants, youth, oppressed nations, people with disabilities, etc., not to mention those threatened by global warming. Because of their role in the process of capitalist production, workers have a special strategic power (potentially). As workers, they have their hands on the means of production, distribution, transportation, communication, consumption, and services. If they wanted to, they could stop society from working,

shutting it down. And they could, if they would, restart the economy on a new, radically democratic, cooperative, and ecological, basis—antiauthoritarian socialism.

Both capitalist and workers' revolutions are uprisings of the mass of people against the old ruling class and its state. But what a capitalist revolution did was to replace the old masters with a new ruling class—the aristocracy with the bourgeoisie. The majority of people did get some benefits (it is better to live under a bourgeois democracy than a unlimited monarchy), but the main function of the capitalist revolution was to replace one set of rulers with another. This means that the ideology of the leaders of the revolution was always a falsehood. Bourgeois revolutionaries could not tell the peasants and artisans that they were only changing rulers. A minority would still be powerful and wealthy while all others would labor for them. Subjectively, the revolutionary leaders may or may not have believed that they were bringing “liberty, equality, fraternity” and the “rights of man” to the people, or “inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” What mattered is what they actually did.

In contrast, the workers' revolution must be based on the consciousness of the people, an awareness of what they are really doing. The big majority of the people—the workers, their families and dependents, peasants (still a big group around the world), and women, as well as people of oppressed races, nations, and religions, etc.—will rise up and make a revolution in their interests, under their control. Working class revolutionaries must tell the truth. Even at times when it is unpopular to do so, they must say what is.

Differences Between Capitalist and Workers' Revolutions

At the core of capitalism is the market. Commodities are produced in order to exchange for money and for each other on the mar-

through appointed managers. They set up a centralized state planning agency to manage the economy (which never worked well).

This was done under Lenin and Trotsky, setting the framework for Stalin's totalitarian rule. Of course, there were objective problems, including the aftermath of a world war, a revolution, and a civil war in a poor, peasant-majority country. But Lenin and Trotsky did not say that these were temporary measures due to exceptional unfavorable circumstances. Instead they declared that one-party rule was a principle of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Even most of the oppositions developing within the Communist Party agreed with the principle of one-party dictatorship. This included Trotsky's Left Opposition, which continued to uphold the Communist Party dictatorship until the mid-thirties (by which time the Russian Trotskyists were smashed).

Substitutionism Creates State Capitalism

By the thirties, all remnants of workers' power had been eliminated from Soviet Russia. The state had a structure essentially the same as in Nazi Germany. The bureaucracy ruled uncontested. The economy was almost entirely nationalized. The working class and peasants were beaten down, oppressed and exploited—as were women, intellectuals, and non-Russian nationalities. What was this society?

Trotsky and most critical Communists continued to regard Stalin's Soviet Union as a “workers' state” of some sort. Many Marxists still see it that way, saying it was “socialist,” “post-capitalist,” or “progressive.” And therefore a regime to be supported against Western capitalist states. What most matters to these Trotskyists and others is not whether the working class actually ruled but that property was collectively owned by the state.

of revolutionaries who had believed in the democratic-libertarian promises of Lenin. Such groupings were driven out of the one legal party and banned. By 1921, the Russian state had become a one-party police state. This was under the rule of Lenin and Trotsky and after the Civil War had been won. (This summary is extremely condensed and controversial. Again, see Price 2007.)

It was not substitutionist for Lenin and his co-thinkers to form a political party or for other socialists to form a revolutionary organization with those who agree with them. Such an organization could serve to develop theory and program. It could fight to spread its ideas and strategies among the workers and others. (There is an historical trend of anarchists who have advocated such organizing, including Bakunin, Malatesta, Makhno, and the FAI-ists.) This is a revolutionary minority seeking to win over the majority. It is not counterposed to the self-organization of the working class and oppressed. It is a crucial part of that self-organization.

What was substitutionist was the idea that the revolutionary party could stand in for the working class, that it could run the state in the interests of the workers and peasants, even against the opposition of the people. From the beginning of the revolution, the Bolsheviks held that only they knew how to lead the revolution, and that the solution was for them to get state power. (Even though, for most of their history, the Bolsheviks, like the Mensheviks, had falsely held that the Russian Revolution would stay within the limits of a capitalist revolution.) Once the October Revolution had occurred, they set up a new government, uncontrolled by the soviets. They gerrymandered and did other things to keep themselves in power. They might have formed a united front with other parties which supported the soviets (Left SRs, Left Mensheviks, anarchists). Instead, they pushed the other left parties out of power and out of the soviets. They set up an uncontrolled secret police with the power to arrest and shoot opponents. They killed off the factory committees and stratified the unions, running industry

ket. This includes the commodity of human labor power, the ability of the workers to work for a period of time, which they sell for wages or salaries. (This is an unusual commodity since it produces more wealth than it costs the capitalist to buy [hire] it, which is to say it creates the basis of profit.) Despite the growth of semi-monopolies and government intervention, the market is not really controlled by anyone, including the capitalist class. In its essence, it runs on its own, ultimately obeying only the “laws” of supply and demand, of what Adam Smith called the “invisible hand” or what Marx called “the law of value.”

The job of a capitalist revolution is to clear the way for the free play of the market. It is to get rid of feudal regulations, aristocratic limitations, slavery, serfdom, guild rules, and monarchial licenses. The revolution establishes a new state, which works to set up the basic conditions of capitalism: an accumulation of wealth, available to be capital, and a “free” population of propertyless workers (not serfs or urban artisans), needing to sell their labor to the capitalists in order to live. The state may intervene in the capitalist economy to a greater or lesser extent, but it does so in order to keep production for the market going.

So long as it does this, the exact nature of the capitalist state may vary enormously. It could be a relatively democratic republican state, with universal suffrage for all adults. It could be a military junta or a police state. It could be a totalitarian fascist regime. The capitalist class may have much direct influence (as in a capitalist democracy) or very little (as in various dictatorships). In general the capitalists prefer to run their own businesses and let someone else manage the state; even in a capitalist democracy, they mostly hire professional politicians to run the government. But as long as the state maintains capitalist production and the market, the system remains capitalist and the state is a capitalist state. A revolution which establishes such a state (in any of its possible forms) is a capitalist revolution.

In contrast, the modern working class is a collective, cooperative, force. Workers do not “own” three feet of factory assembly line, nor their own cubicle in an office, nor five square feet of an auto body shop. In this they are unlike stock-owning capitalists, slave-owning lords, or even land-owning peasants. The individual workers own nothing of the means of production. They must work together to produce (distribute, etc.) goods, not only with their immediate fellow workers but also with workers in other workplaces, who make the material which goes into their own products, and those who distribute the produced goods. Unless the workers collectively and democratically manage the economy together, they cannot be truly said to manage the economy (or any other part of society). If they do not run industry together, then they continue to be on the bottom, taking orders from someone else, some boss, still exploited, dispossessed, and oppressed.

This means that some other social force cannot manage society for the workers. This is unlike capitalism, where all sorts of groupings may manage the state and society for the capitalist class. No one else can substitute for the working class, if they are to be free. In particular, this means that no layer of state bureaucrats can stand in for the workers. Contrary to the Trotskyists, there can be no such thing as a bureaucratic-ruled “degenerated” or “deformed workers’ state.”

Anarchists and Marxists define the state as a bureaucratic-military socially-alienated machine, with layers of specialized armed people and professional politicians and bureaucrats, which stands above the rest of society and dominates it. It would be impossible for the mass of workers and formerly oppressed to self-govern through such a social mechanism. The existence of a state means the domination over the working class, which would still be at the bottom of society, taking orders. It would mean the rule of some minority class, whether or not this class claimed to substitute itself for the workers. In short, there can be no such thing as a “workers’ state,” period.

The lack of a state does not mean the absence of social coordination, planning, or self-defense. The people could organize themselves through federations of workplace councils, neighborhood assemblies, and militia units (the armed people, so long as necessary). This would not be a state above society; it would be the self-organization of the working people. When everyone (or at least all the formerly exploited) governs, then there is no government.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 and After

From an anarchist perspective, a great deal could be said about the Russian Revolution (for an overview, see the chapter on the “Russian Revolution” in Price 2007). For example: the “October Revolution” overthrew the unelected, pro-war, pro-capitalist Provisional Government (which had followed the overthrown Czarist monarchy). In its place, the October Revolution officially established the radically democratic power of the soviets. These were directly elected councils, created by the people, and rooted in factory committees, peasant assemblies, and military units.

The “October Revolution” is often mistakenly called the “Bolshevik Revolution.” Actually it was organized by a united front of Lenin’s Bolshevik Party, Left Social Revolutionaries (pro-peasant populists), and anarchists. When the new soviet power was established, it had a coalition government of Bolsheviks (re-named the Communist Party) and Left SRs (the Communists had almost no base among the peasants, the vast majority of the population)—with support in the soviets from the anarchists.

The history of the early Soviet Union is one of the Communists antagonizing the other left socialist parties and groups, driving them out of the government and the soviets, outlawing them, arresting and shooting their members. This began before the Civil War and foreign invasion and continued after it. Meanwhile, there had been opposition caucuses within the Communists, composed