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The Perspective of Communism

International Communist Current
2004

This was a four-part series that the ICC published in the 1970s, possibly in both *World Revolution* and *Revolution Internationale*. It was republished with some prefaces in 2004 in *World Revolution*. The series is available online at https://en.internationalism.org/series/336.

Perspective of Communism, part 1: Why communism is necessary and possible

2004 Preface

In the movement of the working class against the attacks of capitalism, the specific role of revolutionaries is not just to insist on the need for workers to take control of their struggles and spread them as widely as possible; it is also to show that the day-to-day struggles of our class are the preparation for an ultimate confrontation with this system, aimed at dismantling it and replacing it with a radically new society.

We are not talking here about the 'alternative worlds' proposed by the 'anti-globalisation' movement; as we show in our article on the European Social Forum, these are not really an alternative at all, but a slightly modified version of present-day capitalism. We are talking about communism.

Ah, but 'communism is dead' we are told: it died when the Berlin Wall fell and the Stalinist regimes of the east collapsed. At best, the argument goes, the idea of communism is 'utopian', impossible, contrary to human nature, a daydream of mad fanatics. And indeed, for the vast majority of workers – even those engaged in bitter struggles against the system – communism is also no more than a nice idea, good in theory but unworkable in practice.

And we reply: the claim that communism died in 1989 is a lie – the deceitful propaganda of the ruling class. **Because the Stalinist regimes had nothing to do with communism and were capitalist from top to bottom**. The demise of these regimes was not the death of communism, but the end of a particular form of capitalist domination.

With the republication of this series written in the 1970s[1], we intend not only to show what communism really means, but also to show that far from being a failed dream, communism is both **possible** and absolutely **necessary**, the only real solution to the insoluble contradictions of capitalism in decay.

Introduction

The idea of a society in which misery, oppression, social inequalities and private property no longer exist is not new. Solidarity would be the basis of all human interaction

[1] See *World Revolution* 25, 26, 28; the series is also available on our website.

in this society, where men would no longer respond to each other like vicious animals. The blossoming of liberty for each would be the condition governing the flowering of liberty for all. In differing forms, this idea crops up even in the earliest writings of Antiquity. The Greek philosopher Plato wrote of it (while simultaneously defending slavery!), as did the first Christians. Later, in the Middle Ages, it reappeared, most notably in the conceptions of the Millenarian movements, but also in the writings of the German monk Thomas Münzer, one of the leaders of the Peasant Wars.

The historic limits of capitalism

However, communist conceptions were not fundamentally developed until such time as a new class – the proletariat – made its first appearance in society. For the first time in history, a class existed which carried within itself the real possibility of transforming the old dream into reality. As early as the seventeenth century in England and the eighteenth in France, political currents grew up within the bourgeois revolutions taking place at that time and proclaimed the communist project in more or less explicit terms. Thus, even while the proletariat was not a fully formed class in society, it nonetheless created organisations like the 'True Levellers' in England and the Equals in France to defend its historic interests. But it was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, with the growth and concentration of the working class accompanying the development of large-scale industry, that the communist movement was able to make precise its own objectives and the means to attain them. This entailed a break with past utopian conceptions, best-expressed in the work of Fourier, Saint-Simon and Owen, and the distancing of the movement from the sectarian, conspiratorial activity of Blanqui and his cohorts. Religious references which had permeated the movement previously, and which even influenced as lucid a communist as Weitling, were swept aside in 1847 with the appearance of the first rigorous, scientific formulation of communism. The *Communist Manifesto* provided the theoretical basis for all the later developments in understanding of the proletarian movement. In this document, communism is not presented as the invention of a few visionaries that merely awaits application, but is seen as the only society which can succeed capitalism and overcome its mortal contradictions. The essential argument contained in the *Manifesto* is that capitalism, like all societies before it, cannot go on forever. If it did at one point represent a progressive step in the development of humanity, notably by unifying the world through the creation of a world market, capitalism today is wracked with insurmountable contradictions. These plunge the system into ever more violent convulsions which will end in it being swept away. By causing an immense development in the productive forces of society, and most important among them the working class itself, capitalism has brought into being the conditions necessary for its own transcendence and the creation of a society based on abundance. The working class is the subject of the social transformation of capitalism, and situated as it is on the lowest rung of the social ladder, it cannot emancipate itself without emancipating the whole of humanity.

Decadence of capitalism and perspective of communism

Although the *Communist Manifesto* was mistaken in its conception that capitalism had already reached the limits of its own development and the communist revolution was, therefore, imminent – a mistake which its authors Marx and Engels recognised some years later – nonetheless its essential understanding of the unfolding of capitalist development has subsequently been amply confirmed. This is particularly true with regard to the idea that capitalism cannot escape from its own economic crises, which become successively more violent.

Today, once again, the economic crisis imposes on society an aberration typical of capitalism. Hundreds of thousands of individuals are plunged into the most terrible misery, not because production is insufficient to meet their needs, but because production is too great. However, today's crisis is of a different type than the crises analysed in the *Manifesto*. The crises of the last century appeared in a period of full capitalist expansion; the system could 'solve' its crises at that time by eliminating the least profitable sectors of the economy in conjunction with its conquest of new markets. The crises of the nineteenth century constituted the heartbeat of a vigorous social organism. But since the first world war capitalism has entered into its phase of historical decline; of permanent crisis. From that time on, no real solution to the crisis has been possible within capitalism. The system can only continue to exist on the basis of an infernal cycle in which increasingly acute crises are followed by war, reconstruction and further crisis. As the Communist International announced in 1919, the era of imperialist wars and revolutions had arrived and communism was on the historical agenda. Since then, the successive convulsions suffered by humanity have confirmed, each time more forcibly, the urgent need for humanity to go beyond the capitalist mode of production which now severely hampers any further human development.

After the first world war, the crisis of 1929 provided another spectacular illustration of the bankruptcy of capitalism. In its wake, the holocaust of the second world war demonstrated that the scope of capitalist barbarism could exceed even the unbelievable horror of the first world butchery. Since capitalism has entered into its phase of decadence, humanity has paid the monstrous price of over 100 million deaths to keep this system functioning; and that is not counting the terrible human losses caused by unnecessary famine, malnutrition and general misery which capitalism forces millions of human beings to endure.

Today's crisis is not the first indication of capitalism's bankruptcy, nor the first proof of the need to replace it with communism. In many domains the crisis merely reflects in a clearer light contradictions which have torn the system apart in the past. But to the extent that a startling discrepancy exists between the enormous possibilities this system possesses to satisfy human needs, and the catastrophic usage to which capitalist production is actually put, the necessity for another type of society makes itself felt today in a way which is even more imperative than it was in the past.

The new society which will succeed capitalism must be able to overcome the contradictions which plague society today. This is the only way that such a society can function as a definite objective necessity and not as a utopian construction of the human mind. Its characteristics must be in complete opposition to the negative laws underpinning the development of capitalist society.

The root cause for the evils which ruin capitalism resides in the fact that the aim of capitalist production is not to satisfy human needs but to accumulate capital. Capitalist production does not produce use values but exchange values. Private appropriation of the means of production thus comes into conflict with their increasingly social character. In other words, capitalism decomposes because it produces for a market which is itself more and more restricted since it is based on an exploitation of wage labour. The surplus value produced by the exploitation of the working class can no longer be realised, i.e. be exchanged for goods which can enter into an enlarged cycle of capitalist reproduction.

The basis of communist society

The economic character of communism must, therefore, be the following:

1. The only incentive governing production will be the satisfaction of human needs.
2. The goods which society produces will cease to be commodities; exchange-value will disappear and only use value will remain.
3. The present restricted framework hampering the process of production will become more and more socialised. Private ownership of the means of production, whether possessed on an individual basis as in laissez-faire capitalism or by the state as in decadent capitalism, will give way to the socialisation of the means of production. This will mean the end of all private property; the end of the existence of social classes and thus the end of all exploitation.

One objection is often raised against this conception of society. It questions why such a society has not already come into existence since it would contain all the characteristics most appropriate to human development and would most closely constitute an ideal form of society. In other words, why should this form of society be a possibility today when it hasn't been possible to create a society like this in the past? In their reply to questions like these the anarchists usually answer, as all the utopians answered before them, that in fact communism has always been possible. Since objective material conditions don't stand in the way of communism, all that is needed is sufficient human will. What the anarchists can't explain is why human will hasn't been strong enough in the past to create communism and why the will to create communism, which did exist within minority groupings, didn't extend itself throughout society in the past.

Marxism, however, gives a serious answer to these questions. It explains why one of the essential conditions for the evolution of humanity is the development of the productive forces, or in other words the productivity of human labour. Each level of development of the productive forces of a particular society corresponds to a given type of productive relationship. The relations of production are the relations established between men and women in their activity of producing goods destined to satisfy their needs. In primitive societies the productivity of labour was so low that it scarcely satisfied the barest physical needs of the members of the community. Exploitation and economic inequality were impossible in such a situation: if certain individuals had appropriated to themselves or consumed goods in greater quantities than other members of this society, then the poorer off would not have been able to survive at all. Exploitation, generally in the form of slavery established as the result of the territorial conquest of one tribe by another, could not appear until the average level of human production had gone beyond the basic minimum needed for physical survival. But between the satisfaction of this basic minimum and the full satisfaction, not only of the material but also the intellectual needs of humanity, there exists an entire range of development in the productivity of labour. By means of such development, mankind steadily became the master of nature. In historical terms, it was this period which separated the dissolution of primitive communist society from the era when fully developed communism would be possible. Just as mankind wasn't naturally 'good' in those ages when men and women weren't exploited under the conditions of primitive communism, so it hasn't been naturally 'bad' in the epochs of exploitation which have followed. The exploitation of man by man and the existence of economic privilege became possible when average human production exceeded the physical minimum needed for human life to reproduce itself. Both became necessary because the level of human production could not fully satisfy all the needs of all the members of society.

As long as that was the case, communism was impossible, whatever objections the anarchists may raise to the contrary. But it is exactly this situation which capitalism has itself radically modified, owing to the enormous increase in the productivity of labour which it has brought into being. Capitalism methodically exploited every scientific discovery, generalised associated labour, and put to use the natural and human riches of the entire world. But obviously the increase in the productivity of labour set in motion by capitalism was paid for by an intensification of exploitation on a scale unknown in human history. However, such a profound increase in human productivity does represent the material basis for a communist society. By making itself the master of nature, capitalism created the conditions by which humanity may become master of itself.

Humanity's future at stake

The capitalist crisis today is an excellent demonstration of the necessity for communism. For the first time in the history of humanity, a society plunges the greater part of its members into the most acute misery, not because it cannot produce enough, but because it produces too much in relation to the laws which govern how it regulates production.

Before the rise of capitalism humanity knew crises, but never crises of overproduction. Today this congenital evil of the capitalist system reveals itself with unequalled violence: unemployment increases relentlessly, underemployment spreads throughout the productive process, more and more murderous and extensive wars break out. All of these things prove that the real utopians are those people who imagine it is possible today to achieve a greater satisfaction of human needs through the reform of capitalism, and not its complete overthrow. The whole gamut of economic, political and military events which have shaken the world over the last decades bear testimony to the fact that humanity, if it remains bound by the laws of capitalism, will find itself moving down the road towards a third world holocaust. The magnitude of that war would make the other two appear almost inconsequential.

While the unbelievable destructive power of past inter-imperialist conflicts has demonstrated that mankind can master nature, and therefore that communism is possible, it has also shown that mankind's mastery over nature can also be used to destroy humanity itself. Thus, communism becomes a necessity today, not only to ensure the further progress of the human species, but more simply to ensure that humanity survives at all.

In the next article in this series we will examine various objections raised against the viability of communism, mainly those that argue that humanity is 'naturally' incapable of realising such a society.

Perspective of Communism, part 2: Is communism against human nature?

2004 preface

In the first part of this series, we saw that communism is not merely an old dream of humanity, or the simple product of human will, but is the only form of society which can overcome the contradictions strangling the capitalist system. After developing the productive forces to an unprecedented degree and having constructed a world economy, capitalism then entered into its era of decadence. The permanent barbarism of this era has made communism a necessity not only for the further progress of humanity but even for its simple survival. Thus, contrary to those who announced the 'death of communism' when the Stalinist regimes of the east collapsed, it is

impossible to reform capitalism or make it more human.

In this second part, we are going to look at those who tell us that a communist society as envisaged by Marx and others is in any case impossible to realise because the characteristic features of capitalism, such as egoism, lust for wealth and power, the war of each against all, are actually unchangeable expressions of 'human nature'.

Human nature

'Human nature' is a bit like the Philosophers' Stone for which the alchemists searched for centuries. Up till now, all significant studies of 'social invariants' (as the sociologists would have it) – i.e. characteristics of human behaviour which are the same in all societies – have ended up showing the extent to which human psychology and attitudes are variable and linked to the social framework in which the individual develops. In fact, if we wanted to point to a fundamental characteristic of this 'human nature', to the feature which distinguishes man from other animals, we would have to point out the enormous importance of 'acquired' as opposed to the 'innate'; to the decisive role played by education, by the social environment in which human beings grow up.

> "The operations carried out by a spider resemble those of a weaver, and many a human architect is put to shame by the bee in the construction of its wax cells. However, the poorest architect is categorically distinguished from the best of bees by the fact that before he builds a cell in wax, he has built it in his head" (Marx, *Capital* Vol. 1).

The bee is genetically programmed to build perfect hexagons, and it's the same with the homing pigeon which can find its home at a distance of hundreds of miles, or with the squirrel storing up nuts. On the other hand, the final form of the structure conceived by our architect is not so much determined by a genetic inheritance as by a whole series of elements provided by the society in which he/she lives. Whether we're talking about the kind of structure we have been told to build, the materials and tools that can be used, the productive techniques and the skills that can be applied, the scientific knowledge and artistic canons that guide us – all of this is determined by the social milieu.

Apart from that, the part played in all of this by 'innate' characteristics transmitted genetically to the architect by the parents can be essentially reduced to the fact that the fruit of their union wasn't a bee or a pigeon, but a human being like themselves: i.e. an individual belonging to an animal species in which the 'acquired' element is by far the most important factor in the development of the adult.

It's the same with behaviour as it is with the products of labour. Thus theft is a 'crime', a perturbation in the functioning of society which would become catastrophic if it became generalised. One who steals, or who threatens, abducts or kills people with the aim of stealing, is a 'criminal', and will almost unanimously be considered as a harmful, anti-social element who must be 'prevented from doing harm' (unless of course he does this stealing within the framework of the existing laws, in which case the skill in extorting surplus value from the proletariat will be praised and generously rewarded, just as generals skilled in mass murder are awarded medals). But the behaviour known as 'stealing', and criminals who 'steal', 'murder', etc, as well as everything to do with them – laws, judges, policemen, prisons, detective films, crime novels – would any of this exist if there was nothing to steal? If the abundance made possible by the development of the productive forces was at the free disposition of every member of society? Obviously not! And we could give many more examples

showing just how much behaviour, attitudes, feelings, and relations between human beings are determined by the social milieu.

The peevish-minded will object to this by saying that if asocial behaviour exists, no matter what form it takes, in different forms of society, it's because at the root of 'human nature' there's an anti-social element, an element of aggressiveness against others, of 'potential criminality'. They will argue that, very often, people don't steal out of material necessity; that gratuitous crime exists; that if the Nazis could commit such atrocities, it's because there's something evil in Man, which comes to the surface in certain conditions. In fact such objections only show that there's no human nature which is 'good' or 'bad' in itself; Man is a social animal whose numerous potentialities take on different expressions depending on the conditions that are lived in. Statistics speak eloquently on this question: is it 'human nature' which gets worse during periods of crisis in society, when we see a growth in criminality and all kinds of morbid behaviour? On the contrary, isn't the development of 'asocial' attitudes among an increasing number of individuals the expression of the fact that the existing society is becoming more and more incapable of satisfying human needs – needs which are eminently social and which can no longer be satisfied in a system which is less and less functioning as a society, a community?

The same peevish spirits base their rejection of the possibility of communism on the following argument: 'You talk about a society which will really satisfy human needs, but the desire for property and power over others are themselves essential human needs, and communism, which excludes them, is therefore unable to satisfy human needs. Communism is impossible because man is egoistic.'

In her 'Introduction to Political Economy' Rosa Luxemburg described the reaction of the British bourgeoisie when, in the cause of conquering India, they came across peoples who had no private property. They consoled themselves by saying that these people were 'savages', but it was still rather embarrassing for people who had been taught that private property was something 'natural' to conclude that it was precisely these 'savages' who had the most 'artificial' way of living! In reality, humanity has such a 'natural need for private property' that it did without it for over a million years. And in many cases it was only after bloody massacres, as in the case of the Indians described by Rosa Luxemburg, that they were instilled with this 'natural need'. It's the same with commerce, that 'unique, natural' form of the circulation of goods, the natives' ignorance of which so scandalised the colonialists. Inseparable from private property, it arose with it and will disappear with it.

There's also the idea that if there was no profit to stimulate the development of production, if the individual effort of the worker wasn't recompensed by a wage, no one would produce anything anymore. True enough, no one would produce in a capitalist way anymore; i.e. in a system based on profit and wage labour, where the slightest scientific discovery has to be financially viable, where work is a curse to the overwhelming majority of workers, on account of its length, its intensity, and its inhuman form. On the other hand, does the scientist who, through his research, participates in the progress of technology, always need a material stimulant to work? Generally they're paid less than the sales executive who makes no contribution to the advancement of knowledge. Is manual labour necessarily disagreeable? If so, why do people talk about the 'love of craftsmanship', why is there such a craze for 'do-it-yourself' and all sorts of manual activities which are often very expensive? In fact, when labour isn't alienated, absurd, exhausting, when its products no longer become forces hostile to the workers, but serve to really satisfy the needs of the collective then labour will become a prime human need, one of the essential forms of the flourishing

of human potential. In communist society, human beings will produce for pleasure.

The need for power

Because leaders and authority-figures exist today, it's generally concluded that no society can do without leaders, that men and women will never be able to live without submitting to authority and exerting it on others.

We won't repeat here what marxism has always said about the role of political institutions, about the nature of state power. It can be summarised in the idea that the existence of political authority, of the power of some people over others, is the result of the existence within society of conflicts and confrontations between groups of individuals (social classes) which have antagonistic interests.

A society in which people compete with each other, in which they have opposing interests, in which productive labour is a curse, in which coercion is a permanent fact of life, in which the most elementary human needs are crushed underfoot for the great majority – such a society 'needs' leaders, just as it needs policemen and religion. But once all these aberrations have been suppressed, we'll soon see whether leaders and power will still be necessary. Our sceptic will respond: 'but men need to dominate others or be dominated. Whatever kind of society you have, there will still be the power of some people over others.' It's true that a slave who has always had his feet in chains may have the impression that there is no other way of walking, but a free person will never have this impression. In communist society, free men and women won't be like the frogs in the fairytale who wanted to have a king. The 'need' that people may have to exercise power over others is the flip-side of what could be called the 'slave mentality': a significant example of this is the cringing, obedient army adjutant who's always barking orders at his 'inferiors'. If people feel a need to exert power over others, it's because they have no power over their own lives and over the running of society as a whole. The will to power in each person is the measure of their own impotence. In a society in which human beings are no longer the impotent slaves of either natural or economic laws, a society in which they have freed themselves from the latter and are consciously able to use the former for their own purposes, a society in which they are 'masters without slaves', they will no longer need that wretched substitute for power – the domination of others.

It's the same with aggressiveness as with the so-called 'lust for power'. Faced with the permanent aggression of a society which grinds them into the dirt, plunges them into perpetual anguish and represses all their most basic desires, individuals are necessarily aggressive. This is no more than the survival instinct, which exists in all animals. Some psychologists consider that aggression is an inherent compulsion in all animal species and will therefore express itself in all circumstances. But even if this is the case, let's give humanity the chance to use this aggression to combat the material obstacles which stand in the way of our own development – then we'll see whether there's a real need to exert aggression against other people.

Man's egoism

'Everyone for themselves' is supposed to be a basic human characteristic. It's undoubtedly a characteristic of bourgeois humanity with its ideal of the 'self-made man', but this is simply the ideological expression of the economic reality of capitalism and has nothing to do with 'human nature'. Otherwise one would have to say that 'human nature' has been radically transformed since primitive communism, or even since feudalism with its village communities. In fact individualism massively entered the world of ideas when small independent owners appeared in the countryside

(when serfdom was abolished) and in the towns. Made up of small owners who had been successful – mainly by ruining their rivals – the bourgeoisie was a fanatical adherent of this ideology and saw it as a fact of nature. For example, it had no scruples about using Darwin's theory of evolution to justify the social 'struggle for survival', the war of all against all.

But with the appearance of the proletariat, the associated class par excellence, a breach was opened in the domination of individualism. For the working class, solidarity is the elementary precondition for defending its material interests. At this level of reasoning, we can already reply to those who claim that human beings are 'naturally egoistic'. If they are egoistic they are also intelligent, and the simple desire to defend their interests pushes them towards association and solidarity as soon as the social conditions allow it. But this isn't all: in this social being par excellence, solidarity and altruism are essential needs in more ways than one. People need the solidarity of others, but they also need to show solidarity to others. This is something which can be seen even in a society as alienated as ours, expressed in the seemingly banal idea that 'everyone needs to feel useful to others'. Some will argue that altruism is also a form of egoism because those that practise it do it above all for their own pleasure. Fair enough – but that's just another way of putting forward the idea defended by communists that there is no essential opposition – on the contrary – between individual interest and collective interest. The opposition between individual and society is an expression of societies of exploitation, societies based on private property (i.e. private to others), and all this is very logical – how could there be a harmony between those who suffer from oppression and the very institutions that guarantee and perpetuate this oppression? In such a society, altruism can only appear in the form of charity or of sacrifice, i.e. the negation of others or the negation of oneself; it does not appear as the affirmation, the common and complementary flowering of the self and others.

Contrary to what the bourgeoisie would like us to believe, communism is not, therefore, the negation of individuality. It is capitalism, which reduces the worker to an appendage of the machine, which negates individuality; and this negation of the individual has reached its most extreme limits under the specific form of capitalism in decay: state capitalism. In communism, in a society which has got rid of that enemy of freedom par excellence – the state, which will have no reason for existing – each member of society will be living in the reign of freedom. Because humanity can only realise its innumerable potentialities in a social way, and because the antagonisms between individual interest and collective interest will have disappeared, new and immense vistas will be opened up for the flowering of each individual.

Similarly, far from accentuating the dreary uniformity that has been generalised by capitalism, as the bourgeoisie claims, communism is above all a society of diversity, because it will break down the division of labour which fixes each individual in a single role for the rest of their life. In communism, each new step forward in knowledge or technology won't lead to an even higher level of specialisation, but will serve to expand the field of activities through which each individual can develop. As Marx and Engels put it:

> "... as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he

> wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for one to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic" (*The German Ideology*).

Whatever the bourgeoisie and all the sceptical and peevish-minded may say, communism is made for humanity; human beings can live in such a society and make such a society live!

There remains an argument to deal with: 'OK, communism is necessary and materially possible. Yes, men and women could live in such a society. But today humanity is so alienated under capitalist society that it will never have the strength to undertake a transformation as gigantic as the communist revolution.' We'll try to answer this in the next part of the article.

Perspective of Communism, part 3: Why the proletariat is a communist class

2004 preface

In the first two parts of this article (see *World Revolution* 271 and 272) we established, first of all, that communism isn't simply an old dream of humanity or the mere product of human will, but that the necessity and possibility of communism were based directly on the material conditions developed by capitalism; secondly, that against all the prejudices about 'human nature' making it impossible for humanity to live in such a society, communism really is the kind of society that is most able to allow each individual to flourish to the full. We still have to deal with another question against the possibility of communism: 'OK, communism is necessary and materially possible. Yes, men and women could live in such a society. But today humanity is so alienated under capitalist society that it will never have the strength to undertake a transformation as gigantic as the communist revolution.' We'll try to answer this now.

Is communism inevitable?

Before dealing directly with the question of the concrete possibility of the transition from capitalism to communism, we have to be clear about the idea that communism is certain and inevitable.

A revolutionary like Bordiga could once write: "The communist revolution is as certain as if it had already happened." This really is a distorted view of marxism. While it can draw out certain laws about the development of societies, marxism resolutely rejects any idea of a kind of human destiny, written in advance in the great book of nature. Just as the evolution of the species doesn't involve any finality, i.e. it's not a movement of progressive approximation towards some kind of perfect model, so the evolution of human societies isn't moving towards a model established in advance. Such a vision belongs to idealism: it was the philosopher Hegel, for example, who considered that each form of society was a progressive step towards the realisation of an 'Absolute Ideal' hovering above men and history. Similarly, the Jesuit Teilhard de Chardin thought that man is evolving towards a 'Point Omega' which has been fixed for all time. While the study of history can enable us to grasp the general laws of social evolution in relation to the development of the productive forces, it also tells us that history is full of examples of societies which have hardly evolved at all; societies which, far from giving rise to more progressive forms of social development, have either stagnated for thousands of years, like the Asiatic societies, or have simply decayed on their feet, like ancient Greek society. As a general rule,

the mere fact that a whole society has entered into decadence in no way means that it contains within itself the basis for a higher social form; it can just as easily collapse into barbarism and lose most of the cultural acquisitions and productive techniques which had determined and accompanied its former development.

It's a very particular kind of society, capitalism, which developed on the ruins of the feudal society of western Europe, and which has created on a world-scale (being the most dynamic form of society that has ever existed) the material conditions for communism. But capitalism, like many other societies, is not immune from the danger of total decay and decomposition, of annihilating all the advances it has made and dragging humanity several centuries or several thousand years backwards. In practical terms, it's not hard to see that this system has created the means for the self-destruction of all human society, precisely because it has extended its domination across the whole planet and has reached such a level of technical mastery. As we've already seen, the conditions which make communism possible and necessary are also the conditions which threaten humanity with irreversible decline or total destruction.

Revolutionaries are not charlatans; they don't go about announcing the inevitable advent of a golden age which we have only to wait for quietly. Their role isn't to preach sermons of consolation to humanity in distress. But while they can have no certainty about the inevitable coming of communism (it's precisely because they're not certain that they dedicate their lives to the struggle to make what is possible become a reality), they must insist on the real possibility of such a society – not only on the level of material possibilities or of the theoretical capacity of human beings to live in such a society, but also as regards the capacity of humanity to make this decisive leap from capitalism to communism, to make the communist revolution.

The subject of the communist revolution

Because of the failure of past revolutions, whether they were crushed like those in Germany and Hungary in 1919, or whether they degenerated as in Russia, the average bourgeois draws the conclusion that the revolution is impossible. He has a grim warning for all who want to embark on such ventures: "Woe betide you if you try to revolt! And if you ever do, look what happened in Russia!" It's quite understandable that the bourgeoisie should think like this: it's in line with its interests as a privileged, exploiting class. And this doesn't mean that the bourgeoisie itself isn't alienated. On the contrary, as Marx and Engels wrote:

> "The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence" (Marx, *The Holy Family*).

But, however ferocious their exploitation, however inhuman their living conditions over the past fifty years, workers have been impressed by such arguments, to the point of virtually giving up any hope of emancipating themselves. This despair has allowed all sorts of theories to blossom, notably those of Professor Marcuse[2], according to which the working class is no longer a revolutionary class, is integrated into the system, so that the only hope for the revolution lies with the marginal strata, those who are excluded from present-day society like 'the young', 'blacks', 'women', 'students' or the peoples of the Third World. Others arrived at the idea that the

[2] Marcuse was a 1960s guru of student and third world radicalism.

revolution would be the work of a 'universal class' regrouping nearly everyone in society.

What actually lies behind all these theories about the 'integration' of the working class is a petty-bourgeois disdain for the class (hence the success of these theories in the milieu of the intellectual and student petty bourgeoisie). For the bourgeois and petty bourgeois that follow in his footsteps, the workers are nothing but poor sods that lack the will or intelligence to make anything of their lives. They spend the whole of their lives being brutalised: instead of breaking out of their conditions they fritter away all their leisure-time in the pub or stuck in front of the TV, the only thing that arouses their interest being the Cup Final or the latest scandal. And, when they do demand something, it's just a measly wage rise so that they can be even more alienated by the 'consumer society'.

After the patent failure or recuperation of the marginal movements that were supposed to overturn the established order, it's understandable that those who held such theories should now be giving up any perspective of changing society. The most astute of them are now becoming 'new philosophers' or officials of the social democratic parties; the less well provided for are drifting into scepticism, demoralisation, drugs or suicide. Once one has understood that it won't come from 'all men of good will' (as the Christians believe), or from the universal class (as *Invariance*[3] believes), or from the much-vaunted marginal strata, or from the peasants of the Third World as Maoism and Guevarism claim, then one can see that the only hope for the regeneration of society lies with the working class. And it's because they have a static vision of the working class, seeing it as a mere collection of individual workers, that the sceptics of today don't think that the working class is capable of making the revolution.

As early as 1845, Marx and Engels replied to these kinds of objections:

> "It is not a question of what this or that proletarian, or even the proletariat as a whole, may imagine for the moment to be the aim. It is a question of what the proletariat actually is and what it will be compelled to do historically as the result of this being" (*The Holy Family*).

If you consider that the working class will never be anything but a sum of what its members are today, then no, the revolution will never be possible. But such a viewpoint makes an abstraction of two fundamental aspects of reality:

- The whole is always more than the sum of its parts;
- Reality is movement. The elements of nature are not immutable and the elements of human societies even less so. That's why one must avoid taking a photograph of the present situation and thinking that this is an eternal reality. On the contrary one must grasp what exactly is this "historic being" of the proletariat which pushes it towards communism.

Exploited class and revolutionary class

Marx and Engels tried to answer this question in *The Holy Family*:

> "When socialist writers ascribe this world-historic role to the proletariat, it is not at all, as Critical Criticism pretends to believe, because they regard the proletariat as gods. Rather the contrary. Since in the fully-formed

[3] *Invariance* was a group that came out of Bordigism in the 1970s and evolved towards the idea of a universal class that would make the revolution instead of the proletariat.

> proletariat the abstraction of all humanity, even of the semblance of humanity, is practically complete; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in their most inhuman form; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer removable, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative need – the practical expression of necessity – is driven directly to revolt against this inhumanity, it follows that the proletariat can and must emancipate itself" (*The Holy Family*).

However this answer is still insufficient. This description of capitalist society can also be applied to all class societies; this description of the working class can be applied to all exploited classes. This passage explains why, like all other exploited classes, the proletariat is compelled to revolt, but it doesn't say why this revolt can and must lead to revolution i.e. the overthrow of one kind of society and its replacement by another: in short, why the working class is a revolutionary class.

As sceptics of all kinds are prone to point out, it's not enough for a class to be exploited for it to be revolutionary. And in fact, in the past, the opposite has been the case. In their day, the nobility fighting against slave society and the bourgeoisie fighting against feudalism were revolutionary classes. This didn't make them exploited: on the contrary, they were both exploiting classes. On the other hand, the revolts of the exploited classes in these societies – slaves and serfs – never resulted in a revolution. A revolutionary class is a class whose domination over society is in accordance with the establishment and extension of the new relations of production made necessary by the development of the productive forces, to the detriment of the old, obsolescent relations of production.

Because both slave society and feudal society could only give rise to another exploitative society – due to the level of the development of the productive forces in those periods – the revolution could only be led:

- by an exploiting class;
- by a class which wasn't specific to the declining society, while those classes who **were** couldn't be revolutionary, either because they were exploited or because they had privileges to defend.

In contrast, since capitalism has developed the conditions which make the elimination of all exploitation both possible and necessary, the revolution against it can only be made:

- by an exploited class;
- by a class which is specific to capitalist society.

The proletariat is the only class in present day society which meets these two criteria; it's the only revolutionary class in present-day society. Thus we can now respond to the central objection which this article set out to deal with. Yes, the proletariat is an alienated class, subjected to the whole weight of the ruling bourgeois ideology; but because it produces the bulk of social wealth and is thus more and more shouldering the burdens of the capitalist crisis, it's going to be compelled to revolt. And in contrast to the revolts of previous exploited classes, the revolt of the proletariat isn't a desperate one: it contains within itself the possibility of revolution and communism.

The objection can be raised that there have been attempts at a proletarian revolution but that they have all failed. But just as the fact that the plague decimated society for centuries didn't mean that humanity would have to suffer this scourge for

ever, so the failure of past revolutions shouldn't lead us to the conclusion that the revolution is impossible. The main thing which held back the revolutionary wave of 1917-23 was the fact that the proletariat's consciousness lagged behind its material existence: although its old conditions of struggle had become obsolete once capitalism had passed from its zenith to its decadent phase, the class didn't become aware of this in time. It thus went through a terrible counter-revolution which silenced it for decades.

Once again, we don't pretend that victory is certain. But even if there is only a chance in a thousand that we're going to win, the stakes involved in today's struggles are so momentous that, far from demoralising us, this should galvanize the energies of all those who sincerely aspire to a different kind of society. Far from despising, ignoring or underestimating the present struggle of the working class, we must understand the decisive importance of these battles. Because the proletariat is both an exploited class and a revolutionary class, its struggles against the effects of exploitation prepare the way for the abolition of exploitation; its struggles against the effects of the crisis prepare the way for the destruction of a society in mortal crisis; and the unity and consciousness forged during these struggles are the point of departure for the unity and consciousness which will enable the proletariat to overthrow capitalism and create a communist society.

Perspective of Communism, part 4: How the proletariat organises itself to overthrow capitalism

In the previous articles in this series, we have seen:

- why today communism is both a necessity not only to ensure the blossoming of humanity but also its simple survival;
- why, for the first time in history, this is no longer a simple dream, but that mankind has at his disposal the material conditions for taking this immense step forward;
- why man is really capable of living in such a society and making it work;
- why, despite all the alienation that weighs upon the consciousness of man, there exists a class in society, the proletariat, capable of transforming its struggle against exploitation and oppression into a struggle for the establishment of a new order that will abolish exploitation, oppression and all divisions into classes.

In the present article, we are continuing this examination of the perspective of communism by looking at how the proletariat can organise itself to make the revolution.

For a long time revolutionaries, along with the proletariat as a whole, have groped for an answer to the question: how will the workers organise themselves to make the revolution? In earlier times (from Babeuf to Blanqui) small conspiratorial sects were in favour. Subsequently, different workers' societies, such as trade unions or co-operatives, like those gathered inside the International Workers' Association (First International founded in 1864) seemed to represent this self-organisation of the working class with a view to its emancipation. Then the great mass parties assembled in the Second International (1889-1914), and the unions attached to them, presented themselves as the lever for transforming society. But history shows that if these forms of organisation corresponded to stages of development in the capacity of the working class to struggle against exploitation, and to become conscious of the goals of this struggle, none of them were appropriate for the actual accomplishment of its historic task: the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of communism. It is when the historic conditions of capitalism itself put the proletarian

revolution on the agenda that the working class found a suitable form of organisation to carry it out: the workers' councils. Their appearance in Russia in 1905 signified a turning point in the history of capitalist society: the end of its progressive epoch, its entry into decadence, into "the era of imperialist wars and proletarian revolutions" as revolutionaries subsequently understood it. Similarly, if since Blanqui revolutionaries understood the necessity for the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat as a lever for the transformation of society, the concrete form that this dictatorship would take only became clear with the experience of the class itself, and even then with some delay. Falling into step with the old conceptions of Marx and Engels, Trotsky, who nevertheless played a decisive role at the head of the Soviet (workers' council) of Petrograd, could still write in 1906, twenty-five years after 1871: "International socialism considers that the republic is the only form possible for the socialist emancipation, on the condition that the proletariat tears it from the hands of the bourgeoisie and transforms it, 'from a machine for the oppression of one class by another' into an arm for the socialist emancipation of humanity".

The workers' councils, the form of the dictatorship of the proletariat

Thus, for a long time, a 'real democratic republic' in which the proletarian party would play the leading role was seen as the shape and form of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It's only with the revolution of 1917 in Russia that revolutionaries, and in particular Lenin, understood clearly that the "finally found form" of the dictatorship of the proletariat is nothing other than the power of the workers' councils, these organs which appeared spontaneously from 1905 during the course of the revolutionary struggle and which were characterised by:

- their formation on the basis of general workers' assemblies;
- the election and revocability at any time of the delegates;
- the unity between the taking of decisions and their application (non-separation between 'legislative' and 'executive');
- regroupment and centralisation not on the basis of industry or trade but on a territorial basis (thus it's not print workers who come together as in the unions, but all the workers of a firm, a town, a region, etc., who elect delegates to the workers' council of that area).

This specific form of organisation of the working class is directly adapted to the tasks which await the proletariat in the revolution.

In the first place, this is a general organisation of the class, regrouping all of the workers. Previously, all forms of organisation, including the unions, only regrouped a part of the class. While that was enough for the working class to exert pressure on capitalism in order to defend its interests within the system, it is only through self-organisation in its totality that the class is able to carry out the destruction of the capitalist system and establish communism. For the bourgeoisie to make its revolution, it was enough for a part of this class to take power; this is because it only constituted a small part of the population, because it was an exploiting class, and because only a minority of the bourgeoisie itself could raise itself above the conflicts of interests generated by the economic rivalries between its various sectors. On the other hand, such rivalries don't exist within the working class. At the same time, because the society that it is called upon to establish abolishes all exploitation and all division into classes, the movement that it leads is "that of the immense majority for the benefit of the immense majority" (*Communist Manifesto*). Therefore only the self-organisation of the class as a whole is up to accomplishing its historic task.

In the second place, the election and instant revocability of different officers expresses the eminently dynamic character of the revolutionary process – the perpetual overturning of social conditions and the constant development of class consciousness. In such a process, those who have been nominated for such and such a task, or because their level of understanding corresponds to a given level of consciousness in the class, are no longer necessarily up to speed when new tasks arise or when this level of consciousness evolves.

Election and revocability of delegates equally expresses the rejection by the class of all definitive specialisation, of all division within itself between masses and 'leaders'. The essential function of the latter (the most advanced elements of the class) is in fact to do everything they can to eliminate the conditions that provoked their appearance: the heterogeneity of consciousness within the class.

If permanent officials could exist in the unions, even when they were still organs of the working class, it was due to the fact that these organs for the defence of workers' interests within capitalist society bore certain characteristics of this society. Similarly, when it used specifically bourgeois instruments such as universal suffrage and parliament, the proletariat reproduced within itself certain traits of its bourgeois enemy as it cohabited with it. The static union form of organisation expressed the method of struggle of the working class when the revolution was not yet possible. The dynamic form of workers' councils is in the image of the task that is finally on the order of the day: the communist revolution.

Similarly, the unity between taking a decision and applying it expresses this same rejection by the revolutionary class of all institutionalised specialisation. It shows that it is the whole of the class that not only takes the essential decisions that concern it, but also participates in the practical transformation of society.

In the third place, organisation on a territorial basis and no longer trade or industrial expresses the different nature of the proletariat's tasks. When it was solely a question of putting pressure on an employer's association for an increase in wages or for better working conditions, organisation by trade or by industrial branch made sense. Even an organisation as archaic as the craft-based trade union was efficiently used by the workers against exploitation; in particular, it prevented the bosses calling in other workers of the trade when there was a strike. The solidarity between printers, cigar makers or bronze gilders was the embryo of real class solidarity, a stage in the unification of the working class. Even with the weight of capitalist distinctions and divisions upon it, the union organisation was a real means of struggle within the system. On the other hand, when it was a question not of standing up to this or that sector of capitalism, but of confronting it in its totality, of destroying it and establishing another society, the specific organisation of printers or of rubber industry workers could make no sense. In order to take charge of the whole of society, it is only on the territorial basis that the working class can organise itself, even if the base assemblies are held at the level of a factory, office, hospital or industrial estate.

Such a tendency already exists at the present time in the immediate struggle against exploitation. Here again there is a profound tendency to break out of the union form and to organise in sovereign general assemblies, to form elected and revocable strike committees, to spill over professional or industrial boundaries and to extend at the territorial level.

This tendency expresses the fact that, in its period of decadence, capitalism takes on a more and more statified form. In these conditions, the old distinction between political struggles (which were the prerogative of the workers' parties in the past) and economic struggles (for which the unions had responsibility) makes less and less

sense. Every serious economic struggle becomes political and confronts the state: either its police, or its representatives in the factory – the unions. This also indicates the profound significance of the present struggles as preparations for the decisive confrontations of the revolutionary period. Even if it is an economic factor (crisis, intolerable aggravation of exploitation) which hurls the workers into these confrontations, the tasks which are subsequently presented to them are eminently political: frontal and armed attack against the bourgeois state, establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The proletarian revolution: political power as a basis for social transformation

This unity between politics and economics expressed by the organisation of the proletariat into workers' councils requires some elucidation. Which aspect is primary?

Communists since Babeuf have recognised that, in the proletarian revolution, the political aspect precedes and conditions the economic. That is a schema completely opposed to the one that prevailed in the bourgeois revolution. The capitalist economy developed inside feudal society, in the chinks of the latter one could say. The new revolutionary class, the bourgeoisie, could thus conquer economic power in society while the political and administrative structures were still linked to feudalism (absolute monarchy, economic and political privileges of the nobility, etc.). It is only when the capitalist mode of production became dominant, when it was conditioning the whole of economic life (including those sectors which weren't directly capitalist, such as small scale agricultural and craft production), that the bourgeoisie launched its assault on the political power. This in turn enabled it to adapt the latter to its specific needs and lay the ground for a new economic expansion. This is what it did, notably with the English revolution of the 1640s and the French revolution of 1789. In this sense the bourgeois revolution completed a whole period of transition during the course of which it developed inside feudal society, until it came to the point of supplanting it on the basis of a new economic organisation of society. The schema of the proletarian revolution is quite another thing. In capitalist society, the working class possesses no property, no established material springboard for its future domination of society. All the attempts inspired by utopian or Proudhonist conceptions have failed: the proletariat cannot create 'islands' of communism in present-day society. All the workers' communities or cooperatives have either been destroyed or recuperated by capitalism. Babeuf, Blanqui and Marx understood this against the utopians, Proudhon and the anarchists. The taking of political power by the proletariat is the point of departure of its revolution, the lever with which it will progressively transform the economic life of society with the perspective of abolishing all economy. It is for that reason that, as Marx wrote: "Without revolution, socialism cannot be realised. It needs this political act, inasmuch as it needs destruction and dissolution. But here its organising activity begins and here its own aim emerges; its soul, socialism rejects its political envelope" (*Poverty of Philosophy*).

Inasmuch as capitalism had already created its economic base at the time of the bourgeois revolution, the latter was essentially political. The revolution of the proletariat, on the contrary, begins with a political act that conditions the development not only of its economic aspects, but also above all of its social aspects.

Thus, the workers' councils are in no way organs of 'self-management', organs for the management of the capitalist economy (i.e., of misery). They are political organs whose primary tasks are to destroy the capitalist state and establish the proletarian dictatorship on a world scale. But they are also organs for the economic and social

transformation of society, and this aspect makes itself felt from the very start of the revolutionary process (expropriation of the bourgeoisie, organisation of essential supplies for the population etc). With the political defeat of the bourgeoisie, the economic and social dimension will more and more come into its own.