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People's Democracy

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1

THE COMMUNIST PARTIES give the name People's Democracy to their dictatorial governments in Russia and its satellite states in Eastern Europe. What does that word mean? Grammatically it is a pleonasm (an overdose of names). Democracy, literally translated, means people's rule, and was always thus understood; hence people's democracy means people's people's rule, or demodemocracy. It might seem that, since nobody in the world believes that a dictatorship may be called democracy, the imposed misnomer is accentuated by repetition so that it may be more easily swallowed. Just as in mathematics doubling of the negative sign produces a positive value, the authors of this name probably supposed that the doubling of a lie makes it a truth. So it fits harmoniously into the bunch of untruths that constitute doctrine and propaganda of the Communist Party.

Misnomers

A lie is the name which communism, in all former times the expression for a condition of freedom and equality of the masses, now uses for a most tyrannical lack of freedom. Historically it is understandable, because the leaders of the Russian revolution were originally members of the revolutionary wing of socialism, which in the first world war, to dissociate itself from the war-supporting socialist parties, assumed the old, time-honoured name of communists. Actually it is understandable that the Communist Party tries to win the working masses by means of a name expressing their highest ideals; and it is equally understandable that all the reactionary and capitalist forces gladly adopted and followed this use, because in this way all the atrocities reported about Eastern dictatorships now can be laid at the door of the working-class revolutionary fight. A lie also is the name Soviet, because the soviets of the Russian revolution, actually self-ruling workers' councils with political power, have since been reduced to impotent subordinate organs of the State. Deceptive is the name Marxism, as used for a system of thought – Leninism – that in essential points is the very opposite of Marx's teachings from which it proceeded somewhat in the same way as medieval Catholic scholasticism proceeded from early Christianity. But again this misnomer was gladly adopted by all reactionaries, by the Churches and the Pope, because now all the evils threatening mankind can be imputed to Marxian materialism. So democracy may well be added to the list of misnomers, though here the fallacy is so apparent that it has to be hidden behind a repeated assertion.

We cannot, however, be content with pointing out the falsity in the terminology and the propaganda of the Communist Party. When such ideas have a wide influence, when they are believed and defended by able spokesmen and large bodies of adherents, there is bound to be some logic, some sense, a certain truth in them; and we have to find out what this is.

2

An indication may be found in what a Western visitor reported in comparing Eastern and Western ideas; in our Western countries democracy means that everyone may think, speak and write what he wishes, in the East it means that everyone has enough to eat. The former may be important to intellectual classes, the latter is more important to the masses of the peasants and workers. We will not enter here upon the question whether in the Russia of to-day all of them have really enough to eat and whether in that case the price paid for it in the form of despotic rule by secret police is not too high. Nor will we ask whether a political system in which an omnipotent ideal king – as sometimes occurs in children's fable books – takes care that all his subjects have enough to eat, for that reason might be called a democracy. What is relevant in the comparison is the indication that what happened and happens in the Eastern world must be seen in the first place as a revolution against hunger.

Eastern Conditions

During many past centuries the life of the Eastern masses was a life of endless misery, oppressed as they were under the heavy exploitation by big landownership. This feudal system of exploitation was increased and worsened when Western capitalism added its exploitation. It is well known how in the last part of the nineteenth century Russia was afflicted by continuous severe famines, of such intensity that the peasants had to contract the habit of a winter sleep, as animals do, where all bodily activity is suspended. From India it was reported that over large areas the peasants during their entire life never knew satiation by experience. In China the starving peasants, sometimes forced to sell their fields for one meal, over and over again broke into revolt against the exploiting landowners, usurers, and officials. Western capitalist prosperity was based partly on the poverty of the East.

The Russian Revolution was the first Eastern revolution against the rule of big landownership, in which was embodied feudal exploitation combined with exploitation by foreign Western capital. It had as its task to do away with hunger, ignorance, and backwardness of the masses, with the stagnant low productivity of labour. What the revolution economically had to perform was to free the peasant masses from the exploiting feudal masters, and to raise the productivity of labour by industrialisation on a large scale and scientific methods in agriculture and industry. Since there was no numerous wealthy middle class to undertake this task, it fell to the state-officials (in many instances formerly leaders of the revolution) which formed the new ruling class.

This then is the character of the great social revolution taking place in the Eastern countries: the abolition of feudalism by the annihilation of big landownership, and the introduction of industrial and technical progress. Again we do not enter here into the question of how far these aims were realised and how it could happen that tyranny came of it as a result. Liberation from obsolete exploitation does not mean complete freedom, but, as was also the case in Western Europe, the substitution of modern forms of exploitation. What we have to realise is that it means progress, a step in the proceeding evolution of society. Its immediate inner strength is that now

for the first time the peasants could eat their fill; its lasting strength is that industrialisation has started.

Eastern Revolutions

The Russian Revolution has rightly been compared to the French Revolution, a century earlier in Western Europe. What the French Revolution, and in its wake further revolutions on the European continent brought about, the annihilation of feudalism, the Russian Revolution, and in its wake further Eastern revolutions, are now continuing and completing. But in a somewhat different way. In both cases the fall of the feudal system, in which agriculture was dominant, meant the rise of industry. The difference is that in Europe industry started as small business, based on simple technique, in the hands of a numerous class of independent business men, who wanted freedom in every realm. Now, a century later, industry can be introduced as big industry only, based on highly-developed technique, mostly beyond the powers of single, private capitalists; so here the State with its powerful means has to step in. If we consider that at the same time Western capitalism for the some reason introduces many traits of State management and dictatorship, it is understandable that in the East, where the tradition of earlier forms of political freedom is lacking, the new course of industrial development takes place as unrestricted state-capitalism and state despotism.

In Russia this trend took its most direct and radical form. A glance at the map shows Russia to be a part of the great Asian plains, of which Europe itself is an appendix only. Also in this more important respect that Russia in its economic and social structure was always a part of Asia, an immense peasant population living in a partly communistic self-supporting village organisation, under a far-distant autocratic monarch. By its immediate contact with Europe it was the first among the Asiatic despotisms to be carried away on the road of revolution and thus to become the pattern and the conscious leader in the revolutions of the Eastern world. China offers the last and biggest specimen; here, it is true, there was an important wealthy middle-class of merchants and industrialists: but because they were the great landowners themselves they could not join the rebellious peasants and had to be defeated by the "communist" peasant armies. It must be added that in India and Indonesia where there was no revolution of the people's masses but only an upper-class revolution the feudal chiefs have kept their position as part of the new governing class.

3

In the European revolutions against feudalism that inaugurated the rise of capitalism the people's mass stood over against the privileged landholding classes: nobility, clergy, and princes. Though the mass itself consisted of different classes: a minority of wage-workers, a minority of capitalists, a majority of the petty bourgeoisie (artisans, farmers, and business men), this difference was repressed because unity was essential for the common fight. Wherever the fight against the rule of landownership is necessary, it takes consciousness as a fight of the entire people against privilege. So its adequate political expression is democracy, people's rule. Though in the nineteenth century equality of rights and universal suffrage were only gradually won through strenuous struggles, democracy remained the powerful slogan used in the political fight, as the expression of the people's common fight of liberation against "reaction," the form in which the defeated foe tried to persist.

Proletarian Struggles in the West

Now with capitalism in power, development in Western Europe in the nineteenth century took a new course, with a new goal. Most important now was the rising fight of the working class, the proletarian class struggle. It found its clear theoretical expression in the theory and doctrine of Marx. What formerly appeared an undivided people now presents itself as an assembly of different and warring classes, distinguished by their different role in the process of production. The bourgeoisie is master of the production apparatus, the factories, the machines; the workers form the exploited class, and between them the petty-burgher class is declining into dependence and insignificance. This is the important progress in practice and in vision; the social classes come to the front and the presumed unity of the people is an illusion. It was the great task of socialist propaganda, guided by Marxian theory, to make the workers class-conscious, to show them the realities of their own life, to show them that they were a separate class, wage-earners exploited by capital. Socialism had to put up before them the image of a new social order where they themselves would be masters of the production apparatus, and all exploitation would end. Thus the workers' concept of class stands over against the middle-class concept of people. The slogan of people's unity was now deliberately put forward by ruling capitalism against the socialist slogan of class struggle. Whereas in the nineteenth century democracy in the sense of rights and freedom could serve the workers' fight well, democracy in the literal sense of people's rule, inherited from the common fight against feudalism, had to serve as an impediment to the proletarian revolution.

The Russian Revolution, because the workers' strike actions had been its most active force, first took over a number of Socialist terms, though it had to give them new meanings. In adopting now the name of People's Democracy, it finds its way towards a true expression of its deeper character. By this logically somewhat curious name the Eastern world emphasises, perhaps unwittingly, that its revolutions are revolutions against feudalism, not against capitalism. Hence they hear the some fundamental character as the former middle-class revolutions in Western Europe. And by this name, moreover, the new Eastern rulers (just as did the Western politicians) try to deter their exploited subjects from any idea of class and class struggle.

4

Doctrine and propaganda of the Communist Party are fundamentally wrong because they assume and pretend that the goal of the Western working-class, liberation from capitalism, is what has been attained in Russia and the East. What has been attained there is liberation from feudalism, which was achieved in the West already, more or less completely, in the middle-class revolutions. What in the West stands as the direct goal, visibly before the workers – mastery over the production apparatus – the real genuine communism – for the Eastern working-class looms far ahead hardly visible in the darkness of their slavery. What gives support to this error is the fact that the Eastern revolution right away, by means of state-dictatorship, had to introduce planned industrialism, toward which Western private capitalism also is drifting, and which here sometimes is called socialism. To the superficial view this may give the appearance that Russia shows the Western workers their future. It might, if they should remain passive and should not fight for their own liberation. But if they take up the fight there will be another future here.

If we shall be able successfully to oppose the propaganda of the Communist Party where by opposing and abusing its competitor, Western capitalism, it tries to lure the working-class into firmer slavery, we must first clearly recognise the great

historical progress that is embodied in the Russian and the other Eastern revolutions. They freed the peoples from feudal exploitation, gave them enough to eat, and made them enter the era of industrialism – a process that in the West, in different stages, lies far behind us. It brought a new form of exploitation, yonder as well as here, by the masters of the production apparatus, here the private capitalists, there the State officials. Here and there the workers have the same desire, the same goal, to throw off the yoke of capitalism and take production in their own hands; but in the East it will be immensely more difficult, because there they are more strongly fettered, without the rights and liberties of the West. Tillers of the soil, when just risen from serfdom, neither want nor appreciate those spiritual liberties which intellectuals consider the most valuable asset of man; what they want is to produce food in plenty, without being too much hampered or robbed by government. For the modern working-class, however, in a highly-developed capitalism, these spiritual liberties, free speech, free discussion, free organisation are the breath of life, the indispensable conditions of their fight for freedom. For the workers under Western capitalism the concept of democracy embodies these liberties: in the Eastern countries they have only what, though doubly-repeated, for the workers is but an empty name.