

Labour's Right to Run the State

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[Is there new ideological content in "Maoism"?

The following criticism by Mao (*A Critique of Soviet Economics*, Monthly Review Press Publications) on the silence of Soviet political economy over what Mao calls labour's most fundamental right under socialism is taken as a text in this article.

Unless otherwise stated the quoted matter is from 'Reading Notes on the Soviet Text Political Economy', 1961-62]

On page 414 One finds a discussion of the rights labour enjoys but no discussion of labour's right to run the state, the various enterprises, education and culture. Actually, this is labour's greatest right under socialism, the most fundamental right, without which there is no right to work, to an education, to vacation, etc.

The paramount issue for socialist democracy is : does labour have the right to subdue the various antagonistic forces and their influences? For example who controls things like the newspapers, journals, broadcasting stations, the cinema? Who criticizes? These are a part of the question of rights. If these things are in the hands of right opportunists (who are a minority) then the vast nationwide majority that urgently needs a great leap forward will find itself deprived of these rights. If the cinema is in the hands of people like Chung Tien-P'ci, how are the people supposed to realize their own rights in that sector? There is a variety of factions among the people. Who is in control of the organs and enterprises bears tremendously on the issue of guaranteeing the people's rights. If Marxist-Leninists are in control, the rights of the vast majority will be guaranteed. If rightists or right opportunists are in control, these organs and enterprises may change qualitatively, and the people's rights with respect to them cannot be guaranteed. In sum the people must have the right to manage the superstructure. **We must not take the rights of the people to mean that the state is to be managed by only a section of the people, that the people can enjoy labour rights, education rights, social insurance, etc. only under the management of certain people**" (emphasis added).

LENIN'S POSITION

When Mao says, "If Marxist-Leninists are in control, the rights of the vast majority will be guaranteed", he is standing at the position of Lenin.

Shortly after the revolution (and especially after initiating NEP), Lenin began to mark the presence of bureaucrats in the Soviets and the party, and remarked, "We can fight bureaucracy to the bitter end, to a complete victory only when the whole population participates in the work of the government. The result of the low cultural level is that the Soviets, which by virtue of their programme are organs of government *by the toilers*, are in fact organs of government *for the toilers*, by means of the advanced stratum of the proletariat, but not by means of the toiling masses (*On the Party Program, Report Delivered at the 8th Congress of the RCP(B), March 19, 1919*)". Still, he maintained the position that there was no danger to the proletarian state so long as the proletarian elements were in control at the top of the party. In fact, Lenin said, "...when we say 'state' we mean ourselves, the proletariat, the vanguard of the working class. State capitalism is capitalism which we shall be able to restrict, the limits of which we shall be able

to fix. This state capitalism is connected with the state, and the State is the workers, it is the advanced section of the workers; it is the vanguard. We are the state (*Political Report of the CC of the RCP(B) Delivered March 27, 1922 at the 11th Congress of the RCP(B)*).

Lenin was acutely conscious that bureaucratisation started with the induction of bourgeois experts into the government on their terms, which arose from the failure of the workers to organize a nationwide accounting and control of all production and distribution. The need was for the entire people to participate in the work of government but this could not be organised due to the backwardness of Russian society and the unpreparedness of the Russian party.

But Mao goes on to say, "We must not take the rights of the people to mean that the state is to be managed by only a section of the people", and this takes him one step onward from Lenin's position. But he cannot tell here in 1961-62 how the state can be managed by the entire people and not a section. It is true that Lenin envisaged fighting the bureaucratisation of the party with the help of non-party masses and advocated the placement of all organs and departments of the government under the scrutiny of a Workers' and Peasants' Inspection but he never returned to his initial attempt of running the state by the workers directly, the attempt which had failed.

THE SOVIET POSITION AFTER LENIN

Under the leadership of Stalin the question of who actually was in command of the superstructure was not addressed.. Mao says, "Stalin speaks only of the production relations, not of the superstructure, nor of the relation between superstructure and the economic base. Chinese cadres participate in production, workers participate in management. Sending cadres down to lower levels to be tempered, discarding old rules and regulations—all these pertain to the superstructure, to ideology," and "...the Soviet Union...did not do a good job of combining the immediate and the long-term interests of the people. In the main they walked on one leg. Stalin emphasized only technology, technical cadre. He wanted nothing but technology, nothing but cadre; no politics, no masses. This too is walking on one leg." (*Concerning Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*, November 1958)

Again, "They believe that technology decides everything, that cadres decide everything, speaking only of 'expert', never of 'red', only of the cadres never of the masses (*Critique of Stalin's Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*)."

"...And in industry they walk on one leg when they pay attention to heavy industry but not to light industry (and agriculture—*insertion added*).... They exaggerated the importance of heavy industry, claiming that steel was the foundation, machinery the heart and soul. Our position is that grain is the mainstay of agriculture, steel of industry, and that if steel is taken as the mainstay then once we have the raw material the machine industry will follow along (*Concerning...*)..."

"Stalin's book from first to last says nothing about the superstructure. It is not concerned with people; it considers things not people... They speak only of production relations, not of the superstructure nor politics, *nor the role of the people* (emphasis added—*Critique of...*)"

It is amply clear that in the Soviet Union of the Stalin era the workers had no real role in running the state. The state was run by the party cadre. Mao envisages a social entity with the cadre and the masses as the two aspects of a contradiction. The Soviet error was to discard one aspect of the contradiction and substitute the cadre for the masses. Divorced from the masses, the cadre, after the death of Stalin (may be even before), degenerated into apparatchiki, with special privileges (rations, housing, education of children, consumer goods), a bureaucrat-bourgeoisie with rights of disposal over assets of state including means of production

THE POSITION OF THE CHINESE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

In the Cultural Revolution which commenced in 1966, Mao addressed the problem of how the people were to run the state, and, in particular, how the contradiction between the cadre and the masses was to be handled.

The Cultural Revolution supplemented the role of the party in leading the people with the role of the people in keeping a check on the party and its rectification, and introduced the revolutionary committee, (one-third party, one-third people, one-third army) as an organ of power through which the people participated directly in the running of the state. This is what is new in the ideological position of Mao, a proposal for actual implementation of the idea that people make history. Learning through practice (in the Cultural Revolution), he proposed a political and organizational concretization of the abstract idea.

The Cultural Revolution was aimed at,

- (i) overthrowing the power of the “section of the people” who were managing the state (some of whom had, indeed, turned into enemies of the people, a bourgeoisie), and
- (ii) exploring ways and means whereby the entire people could actually and effectively manage the state.

(see the history of the Shanghai Commune—for a brief, non-communist view go to *Wikipedia, Shanghai People's Commune*)

The bourgeois mandarins of the Chinese party and army defeated the Cultural Revolution, but its agenda cannot be obliterated.

THE LESSONS OF HISTORY

What well-wishers of the revolution can learn from this historical account of how the workers lose the power of running the state after revolution (or, may be, even never, in actual fact, gain this power) are :

- 1 Organs of power must be set up amenable to actual and direct control by the workers and allied classes.
- 2 The workers set up the party to manage the revolution. It is an instrument of the workers, not the other way round. The party must carry on continuous dialogue with the people who must have the power to supervise rectification of the party.

The degeneration of the Russian and Chinese parties have bred among intellectuals a trend which denies the need for compulsory expropriation and the need for a separate party for labour. Not only Lenin, but common sense and history reveal that the big property-owners who also control state power will never surrender to voluntary expropriation and a negotiated transfer of means of production to labour, for example, through parliamentary elections. Their logic

is, "I have the gun. You want to take away my possessions? Face my gun." The big property-owners have a highly organized state and political structure. An equal if not greater organization will be required to win the political battle for compulsory expropriation. Herefrom arises the need for revolution and for labour to have a party of its own.

Instead of throwing the baby out with the bath water, what is required is to ensure that the party of the workers is not usurped by a section of the people and the state is run by the entire people and not just such a section. Many well-wishers will join sceptics in calling this a pious wish, unrealizable in the real world of self-seekers. No one can blame such people if they have lived or grown up in West Bengal during the last 32 years! But people do not surrender to pessimism for long because they are at the receiving end of the party bureaucrat's stick, and they stood up for themselves in the Cultural Revolution against the bureaucrat-bourgeoisie of the party and the army. The lessons are there for everyone to learn from.

This process must begin, however, long before any revolution, because once the practice of the party cadre exercising one-way control over the people takes root, any post-revolutionary change will require another revolution like China's Cultural Revolution, a defeat of which will result in capitalist restoration. Also, the people must learn how to run the state, that is, accounting and control of production and distribution, including overall and detailed planning, and must not leave the running of the state to a section only, however well-intentioned.

PEOPLE TO EXERCISE ECONOMIC POWER

Political power arises from (and gives rise to) economic power, the ownership of the means of production, which in practice means the power to use and dispose of them. If the people are to exercise economic power, they are to direct and control economic activity.

If this activity is decentralized, it will be easily amenable to people's control through organs of economic power (planning, implementation and check-up) in which all the people within a pre-determined unit participate. This is the importance of the gram sansad/sabha, a unit of participatory democracy (everyone participates, it has no connexion with panchayet elections and parliamentary illusions). The rulers of the country have created a problem for themselves by giving constitutional sanction to such a unit of participatory democracy, and the rural elite now tries its best to keep these bodies defunct. The revolutionary left, on the other hand, refuses to use these units because of this very constitutional sanction, overlooking the fact that had there been no gram sansad/sabha they would have to be invented to organize economic power in a decentralized manner. Before the people gain political power, locally or nationally, the slogan is 'All economic decisions through the gram sansad/sabha'. To rally people around the slogan and fight for its implementation (a fight which must link up with land redistribution and the fight for local political power), one would need the guidance of people's committees led by agricultural labourers and poor peasants, of the type seen in the early phases of the Nandigram struggle and more recently in the early phases of the Lalgah uprising.

Then there is the problem of organizing heavy industry and overall planning. Again, the lessons of history must first be recounted.

From the time of the NEP in the Soviet Union, the factory was managed by a single person. As Mao says: "Throughout the text speaks of managing production according to the principle of the single-leader system". He points out, "All enterprises in capitalist countries put this principle into effect. There should be a basic distinction between the principles governing management of socialist and capitalist enterprises." He goes on to say, "We in China have been able to distinguish our methods strictly from capitalist management by putting into effect factory leader responsibility under the guidance of the party." This is a rather formal statement, declaring the role of the cadre, without the actual workers being visible anywhere. In fact, in the Soviet Union, too, the party never left the manager alone (for the various forms of this control by the party, see *C Bettelheim, Class Struggles in the Soviet Union*). Mao's emphasis on the direct role of the workers emerges when he refers to the Chinese practice of "... 'the two participations' (worker participation in management and management participation in productive labour), 'the three combinations' (combining efforts of cadres, workers, and technicians)", the separate mention of cadres and workers making it clear that party activity was not being equated to the workers' activity. Direct activity of workers in running the factory is being upheld here. The Cultural Revolution gave form to this activity through the workers' management team, elected from the shop-floors.

Granted that the worker stamps his presence in the running of the factory, what about organizing industry and the economy? In the Soviet Union this was done from the higher echelons of the party, the administrative part being looked after by government organs like the People's Commissariats and the Gosplan. Because the workers had no part in running the planning process, the plans were unrealistic. Mao elaborates, "Here the text mentions that between 1925 and 1958 production of the means of production in the Soviet Union increased 103 times, while consumer goods increased 15.6 times. The question is does a ratio of 103:15.6 benefit the development of heavy industry or not? If we want heavy industry to develop quickly everyone has to show initiative and maintain high spirits. And if we want that then we must enable heavy industry and agriculture to be concurrently promoted, and the same for light and heavy industry." What is the connexion? "Provided that we enable agriculture, light industry, and heavy industry to develop at the same time and at a high rate, we may guarantee that the people's livelihood can be suitably improved together with the development of heavy industry." The point is if the people's livelihood is unsatisfactory how can their enthusiasm be sustained? Because the people were absent in the Soviet planning process, employment levels and the standard of living of the people, linked to agriculture and light industry, were forgotten in the drive for heavy industry.

What is even more important, "if agriculture does not develop, light industry does not develop, it hurts the development of heavy industry." This is linked to the growth of a domestic market, which starts to deal with the output of agriculture and light industry, encounters the need for inputs, and finally grows

to include steel, cement, machinery and chemicals. Only this type of balanced development can sustain heavy industry without dependence on globalization.

The question of decentralization of economic power is present in Mao's theses. He asks, "Should a central-local division of authority be in effect? Which enterprises should be managed by whom? In 1958 in some basic construction units a system of fixed responsibility for capital investment was put into effect. The result was a tremendous release of enthusiasm in those units. When the centre cannot depend on its own initiative it must release the enthusiasm of the enterprise or the locality. If such enthusiasm is frustrated it hurts production."

*The failure of the Soviet economy was due to bureaucratic centralization of economic power in the hands of the higher echelons of the cadre. Without real power, the grassroots administration and the people had no initiative and no interest in sending the right signals, and, finally, even the right data, to the centre, leading to stagnation and faulty planning.

PLANNING BY THE PEOPLE

To refute the argument that it is physically impracticable for the entire people to participate in government, it is better to sketch a very tentative way of implementing this idea of the people running the economy, drawing from (but not duplicating) the practice of Chinese planning before and during the Cultural Revolution (see C Bettelheim—*Cultural Revolution and Industrial Organisation in China, 1974*).

If the direct involvement of the people is desired, a plan for organizing the economy must develop as an overlap of local plans, each conceived (say) at the gram sansad/mohalla sansad/factory level. Overlaps are prepared at the gram sabha/town/industry and the district levels. The district, state and national level planning will require the deliberations of elected representatives from the gram sabhas/towns/industries. So, one may have an upward referral at every level. At each level 'red' experts will have to be consulted.

The national plan is, in this way, drawn up by people's (elected) representatives and not by appointees of the party centre and it will be ratified by a system of public hearings right down to the gram sansad/mohalla sansad, which is a downward referral. All planned economic activity will be updated by continuous upward and downward referrals. Like the gram sansad and the gram sabha the planning bodies will also be responsible for organizing implementation of the plans, that is production by the people, and won't be mere talking shops.

Such a process, involving the people, will never allow displacement of people as in the Narmada dam project. It will never allow wanton destruction of fishermen's livelihoods and pollution of the Hooghly estuary by permitting a chemical hub at Nayachar. It will stop destruction of forests. Instead of building a nuclear plant at Haripur it will concentrate on renewable energy sources with minimal pollution.

The main call of any democratic revolution is for land reform which, apart from redistribution of land, must include a demand for rural employment guarantee at fair wages, in a country like India with 7.5 crores of agricultural labourers (1991 census) compared to 11 crores of cultivators, roughly half of whom are so poor that they have also to lease out their labour power (Government of India, Ministry of Labour). Actual redistribution of land will mainly be of

political morale-boosting value and the tiny plots gained by the landless will not provide the mainstay for any alternative viable relations of production. Peasants will have to be led into co-operative modes and an already present organization of production through wage labour will be able to play the role of leading the peasants.

The entire process will be guided at every level by the revolutionary committees. What about the party? Through the revolutionary committees which guide the organs of people's economic power, the party will be engaged in dialogue with the people and the people's organs at every level. While keeping an eye on graft, scam, and waste, on the general direction and the fight with capitalism, it will have to fight trends of bureaucratic control over the masses within itself. The greater the interpenetration of its dialogue with the people, the more effectively will it be possible for it to act as a compass for socialist transformation. □□