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Real Socialism and the Problem of Real and Formal Socialisation

Keywords: Marxism, historical materialism, real socialism, socialism, real socialization, formal socialization, class struggle

Attempts at creating theory of real socialism

Our aim, as I understand it, is a theoretical reflection on the societies applying rules of “real socialism” and understanding – on the basis of the Marxist tradition – their place and importance in the worldwide revolutionary process, and their role within the transition from capitalism through socialist society to classless society.

Unfortunately, most of the descriptions of “real socialism” are based upon pure Marxology and anti-communist tradition. They discredit socialism in general and remind us Thatcher’s TINA (There Is No Alternative). And if even if such descriptions are not discrediting socialism, they are characterised by naivety that is not only non-Marxist but simply pre-scientific.

It happens when so called “degenerations” of real socialism are being explained as caused by “errors and distortions”, “cult of personality”, “criminal nature of leadership” or endlessly reheated Milovan Djilas’ concept of “the new ruling class”. In all these cases there is no word said about the level of productive forces,

relations of ownership nor classes in the Marxist sense. There is no analysis of modern ownership of the means of production nor analysis of the properties of the labour force.

Even if the ideas of social classes appear, they seem to be derived from commonly recognised relations of power rather than economically conceived property relations or profit and owners. They are formulated in terms of power and management. Similarly, carelessly treated concept of state capitalism refutes itself whilst reducing complex ownership to state ownership. Thus it is forgotten that only a man can be an owner. Of course, it is possible only if property is not naively conceived in terms of law, its illusions nor its false conceptual realism.

Recent times did not bring much improvement to this situation. Antonio Negri, a declared Marxist and a communist, witnessing collapse of real socialism managed only to give himself to joyful drunkenness and celebration of the end “of this primitive and totalitarian socialism” and including it to the “global markets”. Demolition of the Berlin¹ Wall made him think that people of the German Democratic Republic passed on the other side to buy a pair of shoes, because, in fact, they were paupers.² Such a vision of barefooted citizens of the GDR, as comic and absurd it may be, clearly reveals degree of his grasp of the social reality of Europe. It also shows the source of Negri’s pidgin-Marxism. I believe this is a good illustration of the tendency to unsanctioned orientalization of “real socialism” in the West, even by the western leftists, as Edward Said would have said. It is an illustration of cultural racism. Have really Czechs and Poles entered the European Union barefoot?

I believe that we can successfully approach the theory of “real socialism” from the Marxist point of view and exploit Marx’s achievements in a deeper way (especially his discussion about the real and formal subsumption of labour to capital), and obtain specific historical analysis of the October Revolution. However, at first we have to distance ourselves from the naive recognition of possible outbreak of revolution (being a simple function of development of the productive forces) and taking hegemony by the working class.

As Lucien Sève would say, the way modernity often criticises the development of the socialist countries and interim results, helps us assess the degree of notorious lack of understanding of historical materialism. Such lack of understanding leads to the fact that the forced beginnings are considered as the fulfilment

¹ A. Negri, *Goodbye Mr Socialism*, Warszawa 2008, p. 9, 10.

² *Ibidem*, p. 9.

of approved principles. Therefore it is impossible to understand this extremely troublesome fact, that real socialism is much less related to what it “should be”.³

Sève’s statement can be explained in terms of more theoretical categories: briefly speaking, socialist revolution is not just a simple function of development of the productive forces; it does not consist of the severity of the process of socialisation of labour nor, finally, of the general stage of development of capitalism. The socialist revolution, just like the capitalist revolution, is structurally conditioned by level of development of productive forces. It somehow shifts into the shape of class structure and the layout of economic interests with its political representations. But it does not happen in a simple, evolutionarily understood manner. The level of the productive forces determines only certain social minimum, the minimum necessary for making real changes on the level of class struggle.

Real and formal subsumption of labour to capital

For Karl Marx it seemed clear that the process of revolutionary transition from capitalism to socialism (just like antecedent to it shift from feudalism to capitalism) has to do with transformations on two levels.

First of these transformations consists of revolutionising means and forms of production, socialisation of production management associated with them, and increasing division of labour. When it comes to transition to capitalism, Marx briefly formulates it as a transitional epoch determined by craftsman’s workshop – manufacture – factory. Individual producer, workshop, manufacture, factory system – these are the examples of the steps of socialization of production in technical and organisational dimension.

The second level of transformation has proprietary character. In case of capitalism, feudal forms of ownership are being replaced with the capitalistic ones. When we speak about socialist transformation, we deal with the socialisation process of private ownership of means of production/circulation, services, etc.

In the most general sense, continuing growth of productive forces⁴ causes contradiction between the developing productive forces with the existing property relations. In such situations, epoch of social revolution approaches. Yet, dia-

³ L. Sève, *Próba wprowadzenia do filozofii marksistowskiej* [An introduction to Marxist philosophy], Warszawa 1975, p. 269.

⁴ Oskar Lange, distinguished Polish Marxist economist formulated “the law of progressive development of productive forces”. See also: O. Lange, *Ekonomia polityczna*, vol. 4, Warszawa 1983, p. 44.

lectics at the concrete historical level greatly complicates our ability to fulfil this regularity. Formal subsumption of labour to capital assumes that due to the level of development of productive forces, the capitalist property is totally coincidental. System of production in the weaving industry in the mid-19th century Lower Silesia, dramatically described by Gerhart Hauptmann in *The Weavers*, assumes dispersal of work between family farms. Similarly, more advanced manufacture usually apply technologies also used by independent artisans. In general sense, Marx says that as far as the production of absolute surplus value can be treated as material expression of the formal subsumption of labour to capital, but in the case of the real subsumption of labour to capital we are dealing with the production of relative surplus value.⁵

To make the argument simple, the most important thing for us is to remember that the formal subsumption of labour to capital is performed in pre-factory conditions of work organisation, that are symptoms of yet non-existing capitalist production forces.

Formation of such capitalist production forces opens the stage of real subsumption of labour to capital.

The real, the formal and socialism

Real and formal socialisation within the frames of “real socialism” possess parallel theoretical sense.

It does not mean that we are dealing with the fiction of socialisation or only with its juridical but not economic existence. Formal socialisation, just like formal subsumption of labour to capital, is real and determines a necessary basis for establishment and development of capitalist society. Formal subsumption of labour to capital represents rather immature tension between productive forces and imposed property relations, leading to disturbances or even “degenerations” in the functioning of the formal subordination of labour to capital whilst compared to the real subordination of labour to capital.

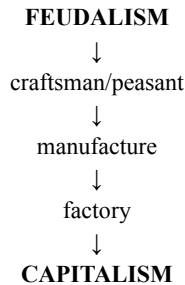
In the case of socialism matters become even more complicated.

Let us take a look at the following sequence: the workshop – manufacture – factory. It was typical for the era when feudalism transformed into capitalism. Now, we need to define an equivalent of manufactures and factories that would function in the new communist/ socialist mode of production. Without settling

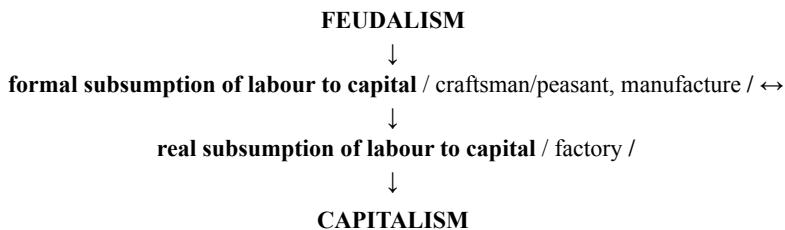
⁵ K. Marks, *Kapital* 5 1.1, Warszawa 2013.

what is the specific basis for the transition period and the communist mode of production, the whole sequence can be represented as follows:

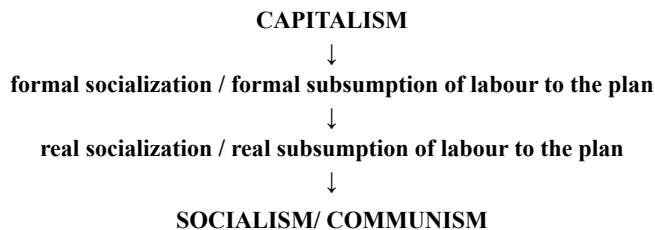
1. The transition from feudalism to capitalism – The forces of production



2. The transition from feudalism to capitalism – subsumption of labour to capital



3. The transition from capitalism to socialism



Of course, specific social relations are not determined by some vulgar technological determinism. But we cannot treat social relations (including proprietary and political relations) as a purely volitional or forcible. From the standpoint of historical materialism, such practice leads to unsanctioned subjectivity of the social being and idealistic understanding of history. The real course of the class

struggle is always a kind of dialectics of complex economic factors and so-called “subjective factor” of the historical process.⁶

Due to the short form of my speech, I will not develop closer characteristic of the productive forces being the basis of formal and real socialisation. This problem has already caused numerous hot discussions. What should be understood in this context, is that millstones and spinning wheel give birth to feudalism, and the steam engine gives birth to capitalism. What is the steam engine of socialism? Or maybe we could translate this question to the language of real socialism – what is “the adequate technical and organisational basis for the communist society”?

At first glance, it seems that currently achieved global level of development of productive forces does not rule out still capitalist property relations. And in countries undertaking the goal of creating a socialist society, their development is less advanced than in the richest capitalist countries. The collapse of real socialism in Europe once again proves that the current level of development of productive forces allows such countries to function within the alternative systems of ownership. This can also be seen in the nationalisation and privatization processes of various sectors of economy, services (education, health care, etc.) or in the coexistence of competing systems – socialised and private.

All of this undoubtedly proves that we are living in the era of transition from capitalism to socialism, and experiencing all of its rich and fascinating twists and complications.

But this is the era following the fall of “real socialism” in Europe.

To explain its historical specificity we need to go first to its sources, i.e., to the genesis of European socialism and the revolution of 1917. We need to visit Imperial Russia and witness the contradictions of global capitalism of the early 20th century.

The socialist revolution as a global phenomenon

The outbreak and the victory of the October Revolution in Russia, the establishment of a socialist state and the consequent development of the world socialist system can hardly be considered a good illustration of classical model theory of the transition from capitalism to socialism. It is difficult to agree that development of productive forces in Russia has lead to such a degree of progress of ca-

⁶ E. Balibar has written about the law of necessary suitability and non-correspondence between the relations of production and the nature of the productive forces. See also: L. Althusser, E. Balibar, *Reading Capital*, Warszawa 1976, p. 419–420, 433.

pitalist relations, that the productive forces became contradictory to the existing proprietary relations.

It is true, that Lenin in *The Development of Capitalism in Russia* reveals the development of capitalism in the Russian countryside, but at the same time he openly talks about the co-existence of communities on pastoral, hunting, pre-agricultural levels. After the revolution and during the introduction of the New Economic Policy, Lenin wrote about these five sectors: patriarchal, small proprietors (peasants, craftsmen – majority of the population of that time), private capitalism, state capitalism and, finally, about the socialist sector.⁷

Statistical data indicate that in pre-revolutionary Russia there was 14.8% members of the working class (3.5% of them were agricultural labourers), peasants and craftsmen counted 66.7%. The bourgeoisie (industrialists, traders, landlords, rich peasants) numbered 16.3% (including 11.4% of rich peasants and 2.2% of intelligentsia).⁸

But this process incurred incredibly large concentration of workers in several cities and large factories. In 1913, 54% of workers were employed in factories employing over 500 workers. Additionally, 400 000 out of 3.4 million working class members worked in Saint Petersburg. Nevertheless, it is impossible to conclude that in this case we are dealing with advancement of the development of capitalist social relations that would overcome capitalism.

The matter becomes clearer when we realise that World War I engaged Russia into a modern war, conducted in accordance with the standards of the 20th century – including general mobilisation and the front reality of the industrial era.

In terms of class theory, we could speak that mobilisation of the peasantry resulted in the appointment of a specific *ad hoc social class*. *This class*, organised in an industrial way, differed from the standard working class because its product (produced on industrial scale) was *its own death*. Such class was established not because of the degree of development of capitalism in Russia, but rather as a result of the development of capitalism and the contradictions of most developed countries of modern capitalism. This *ad hoc class* is a temporary phenomena, only temporarily involved within the global conflict.

⁷ This classification is even cited by *History of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks): Short Course* [История Всесоюзной Коммунистической Партии (Большевиков): Краткий курс], Warszawa 1949, p. 363.

⁸ A. Czubiński, *Kraj Rad: lata zwycięstw i zmagañ*, Warszawa 1973, the table on p. 12.

The Bolshevik Revolution won, because only that party (organised around proletarian internationalism) could reject the imperative of a “patriotic war” and ruthlessly implement the soldier’s demand for the immediate cease-fire. Peace and land for the peasants – these were the first concessions of the new government. Such concessions were suitable for this new **ad hoc class**, but they have also triggered immediate process of liquidation of this class and return to “normal” class system. With the end of the war, socialisation of war production ceases. In time of peace, such temporary socialisation may be continued only if there is primacy of politics over economics, and through administrative–political measures serving as a substitute to the socialisation of production. Bonds of cooperation that arose from the degree of socialisation of production and the level of development of the productive forces are replaced by administrative measures, violence, drastic politicising and ideologisation of everyday life. Such ideologisation takes forms of cultural characteristic of the pre-capitalist epochs. An example of such a form is “personality cult” – kind of organisation of public awareness, bearing simultaneously religious and monarchical character.

Paradoxically, post-capitalist society is created in the pre-capitalist conditions, by using quasi-feudal means, with partly pre-feudal elements (including slave labour).

Contradictions arising upon the outline of such situation become internalised within the framework of social property, within the womb of the communist party... Their forms and intensity seem to be a completely surprising phenomenon, impossible to be grasped cognitively by the participants of the revolutionary process.

Let us note that the overthrow of the Tsar creates a new social situation of democratic governance. It disarms the social imaginarium of power and desecrates, making death in the trenches even more senseless. Although the anti-war attitude is deemed “anti-patriotic” and disloyal to the Allies, at the same time it becomes popular and in its own way has to do with the national liberation movement. It results in extrication of obligation to conduct a cruel war for the share of natural resources and colonies with various branches of global capital. Times after the fall of the Tsar lacked historically established characteristics of national mediation of capitalist society, with its “patriotism”.

Actually, all successful socialist revolutions in their immediate or less direct forms have profound relationship with the national liberation movements and they were class-differentiated people’s fronts. They were taking place at the

periphery of the world capitalist system, before capitalist ideological domination was shaped – or, as Marcuse would say – before the capitalist domination of “one-dimensional” man was formed.

“Real socialism” as formal socialization

I believe that the specific character of “real socialism” is a result of the victory of the

socialist revolution in countries with relatively low level of development of productive forces and the tension between the degree of socialisation of production and the socialist socialisation of property. This results in specific historical aberrations and “ahistorical shifts”. I have in mind not just the monarchical cult of personality or military-feudal relations within the power and government structures, but also phenomena such as: socialist realism, made to measure sensitivity of the rural population undergoing aesthetic education; or acknowledging folk music as people’s music, even though rock and Jimmy Hendrix pass as working class’ music in modern society.

In these countries industrialisation, elimination of illiteracy and tuberculosis were considered achievements of socialism. Similarly, in Poland, the anti-feudal agrarian reform was regarded as a “socialist reform”.

In such cases we have to deal with overlapping:

1. anti feudal capitalist transformation processes,
2. processes typical for the development of capitalism,
3. anti-capitalist socialist transformation.

The two World Wars, intervention of world capital armies, “Cold War”, arms race – these factors obstructed possibility of change, mitigation, overcoming tensions and deformations. It is worth to remember that the situation in post-revolutionary Russia was even worse than in 1914. Agricultural production in 1920 decreased more than half from before the war. The production of large-scale industry decreased seven times. In 1953 agricultural production was even lower than in 1913. In 1952 level of real wages accounted for 66–80% of salary from 1928.⁹

We should also remember that in case of other revolutions we can speak of even stronger tension between the level of productive forces and socialisation of property (e.g. in Mongolia, China, Kampuchea).

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 141.

This briefly outlined path of interpretation can be applied to various areas and conditions of social life in real socialism. This outline differs fundamentally from general theorems of change in the relations of production and property as resulting from development of the productive forces. But it is not a negation of the overall regularity, but rather a specific and historical adjustment and development.

There are no “pure forms”. The transition from one formation to another cannot be resolved at the level of development of productive forces, but at the level of class struggle.

Although, obviously it is not arbitrary. Russian revolution needed not just minimal level of development of the industry and the working class, but also Karl Marx’s modern and superb theory (developed in Germany, France and London), historical materialism and the world war of capital and millions of corpses.

And yet, despite these dramatic circumstances, contradictions and obscurantism, deformation and threats the “real socialism” has become a world power and the demiurge of history. It created real threat of collapse of the world capitalist system. Back in the sixties and seventies, the success seemed to be just around the corner. Pinochet’s military coup seemed to be a sign that capitalism can defend itself against socialism only with the help of extremely discreditable methods, drawing nearer its collapse. One could say that there was a slight error in planning, sort of lousy coordination. If only contemporary Latin America has appeared as supporting Che and Allende, if only People’s Republic of China of the early seventies had such a huge trade surplus as today, if only there was no Soviet intervention in Afghanistan...

From the perspective of world history it indeed seems to be truly a minimal flaw... One could, however ask certain questions even nowadays. Was it really better before, if we look at the situation from the perspective of the world revolutionary process and from the perspective of the road to socialism? Was it better after the Spring of Nations, or when the Communist Manifesto was created? Or maybe was it better after the fall of the Paris Commune? Or maybe after the World War I and the defeat of revolution in Germany and Hungary?

We know the circle was not known in America in the pre-Columbian era. For hundreds of years, loads were transferred, floated, rolled over, thrown, loaded on llamas... but nothing was carried in carriages or carts... It may seem improbable and impossible. Yet a great civilization was established, and even more civilisations were unfamiliar with the wheel. Perhaps we could imagine the world

without free health care and education, with no social ownership of the means of production. It would be a world where the basic values and institutions of socialist thought would be passed over, yet it would somehow exist without them. We are currently witnessing not only the destruction of the socialist movement, but also the achievements of two hundred years class struggle being taken away from the working class and wage earners. The class struggle in defence of the interests of working people continues in all spheres of social life, starting from eight-hour working day, vacation, to free education and health care.

Are we speeding towards a dangerous image of the world without socialism? To a specific “world without the wheel”?

I guess it is not the case, we are not Indians of the pre-Columbian America. We know the wheel, we know what are socialist social values, scientific socialism and the real realisation of the right to work, right to education, right to free health care, right to safe and peaceful old age. We cannot forget “our wheel” nor allow accepting it as if it never existed.

Even if it was possible in Poland, we have to remember that the socialist workers’ movement has international, global character. And even social and political heritage park can have only a limited time horizon.

„SOCJALIZM REALNY”

A PROBLEM FORMALNEGO I REALNEGO USPOŁECZNIENIA

Streszczenie

Słowa kluczowe: marksizm, materializm historyczny, socjalizm, socjalizm realny, społecznienie realne, społecznienie formalne, walka klas

Artykuł przedstawia koncepcję rozumienia realnego i formalnego społecznienia w kontekście historii powstania i istnienia tak zwanego realnego socjalizmu. Jest ona budowana przez analogię do Marksowskich analiz realnego i formalnego podporządkowania pracy kapitałowi. Z tej perspektywy formalne podporządkowanie pracy kapitałowi, a także formalne podporządkowanie pracy planowi są tylko pośrednio określone przez poziom rozwoju sił wytwórczych. O ich realizacji decyduje aktualny stan walki klasowej.