

THE LONG TERM

PERSPECTIVE WITH REGARD

TO TRANSITION

Reflections on the Changes of Socialist Societies in Europe and in the Third World

by François Houtart

Recent events in Eastern Europe as well as in Asian, African and Latin American countries that had opted for an alternative to the capitalist system force us to an overall reflection. One aspect of the problem is exactly to be found in the time dimension. The transition to socialism was often conceived in a short term perspective, even when one makes the distinction between the communist and the socialist stages. The planned character of change made it into a voluntary process and more often than not it was believed that it would suffice to want change so as to achieve it.

1. A Long Transition

The speed with which a number of economic and political organizational forms have disintegrated shows that the process of transition could not get into top gear in a short time. Maurice Godelier has said: "It was the misfortune of socialist societies that they had to start running on capitalist legs". He would have meant that the reproduction of socialist societies did not have the proper material foundations. As a result, the economic system and the organisation of labour were often necessarily borrowed from the very system that one wanted to change.

In other words the transition towards socialism is a process that takes much longer than expected. It is a process marked by process as well as regression

and is situated within history and not at the end of times. The first Christians awaited the imminent establishment of the Kingdom of God; they had to adapt themselves to the demands of reality. The same holds for Marxism in its utopian dimension.

If a period of transition is characterized by the increasing difficulty with which the form of a production system or of a social structure are re-produced whereas at the same time new forms start to emerge, it is clear that a process of transition has

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really existed. However today we witness the triumphant return of capitalist structures. We should ask why and what the consequences of this will be. We do not claim that we can answer this question as this would presuppose numerous and multi-disciplinary studies.

It may be good to recall that capitalism was not dead and that the new orientations developed within a global system that would determine them in many ways. The relations between the two blocs not only on the political or military level, but

also in the field of productivity is an element that should not be overlooked with regard to the present changes. The absorption of the civil society into the political society is another element with which we shall deal later on.

Knowing that it has taken centuries to establish a capitalist production system it was rather unrealistic to think that the new guiding principles of a socialist production system could be imposed by a short term revolutionary process. As every comparison is inadequate it is rather through a theoretical approach that we should find a foundation for our reflection. Recalling in detail the elements that change the guiding principles of a society, the dimensions of such an undertaking become obvious. Moreover from this point of view the demand of political action and of transition do not always coincide.

As a result it is clear that we have to look at it from the long term perspective. But we should not consider time as linear, lest we fall into the same error of perspective. The stage which some have called "the real socialism" and which others have refused to call "socialism" did not lean behind a purely negative balance. Quite a few basic tenets of capitalism have been breached and even if new solutions were not found or met with difficulties in their application, yet those beliefs will forever be questioned. Therefore we have to regard time as dialectic time; not as a near mechanical

pendulum movement but a function of the action of the collective agents.

2. Importance of the Cultural Factor

The cultural factor is one of the fundamental elements of the long term dimension. However this has rarely been emphasized in traditional Marxist thinking that stressed more on the economical and political factors. It has not totally been absent in Marx's thinking nor in the thinking of his successors such as Rosa Luxemburg, Gramsci, Lukacs, Ernst Bloch and more recently Lucien Seve and Maurice Godelier.

Culture as an Element of Social Reproduction

The importance of culture in social reproduction is well known. The representation of the relationship to nature and of social relationships are an integral part of their construction. Maurice Godelier calls it the representation of the real. It is not a "superstructure" in the sense of an element that possibly could be done without. No reproduction or anticipation are possible without a representation of reality. Anticipation is the recomposition into a new whole—the existing and perceived elements of a situation. Even utopias are constructed from what is known.

On a basis of a global vision of reality, the totality of representations is structured into models (i.e. into logical entities) and are thus organised in a coherent way. Other, very different though perfectly rational models are found in a cultural universe that belongs to an analytic way of thinking. The first type is characterised by the fact that it puts causality outside the field of reality (nature or society); the second one puts the causes within.

The cultural models that have emerged from reality as it is read collectively by the social agents, influences in its turn the practice of these social agents. Social structures are indeed produced and reproduced in action and these social structures condition the very existence of the cultural models. It is a complex process that is essentially dialectic but multiple in its concrete reality.

We should not simplify and once more fall into a mechanical pattern. What is sometimes called the relative autonomy of cultural phenomena (in fact an easy all purpose concept) is nothing else than the fact that cultural models tend to outlive the social situations in which they emerged. Here we also need a theoretical explanation. The process of institutionalisation for example, which is at the root of many a reality such as bureaucracy, has been mentioned by Marx himself. Any collective production tends to reproduce itself unchanged once it has been institutionalised and institutionalisation in the very condition for its continuation. In other words, the practices and cultural models tend to repeat themselves linked up with the guiding

principles of the organisation. Therefore they resist change and act to maintain the acquired rights of the agents involved.

Culture should definitely not be seen as standing on itself. Cultural models emerge and reproduce itself only if rooted in reality, material conditions. How could cultural models be transformed in a durable way if the material conditions for their reproduction were not created? They cannot be imposed by mere voluntarist politics; if so they become empty slogans.

I remember an example. Some years ago when together with the Vietnamese Institute of Sociology I was involved in a study about the family problems of workers in Hanoi, I visited a textile factory in the capital. It had been constructed by the Chinese and consisted of an immense hall where several thousands of workers, mainly women, were gathered.

was not destroyed but transformed.

This leads us to raise the problem of how collective consciousness is formed. Socialist regimes, who rightly were pre-occupied with the importance of political factors in the transformation of societies, have often shown a great ignorance of these mechanisms. Studies done in Nicaragua for example, have shown that there is an enormous difference between political consciousness awakened in a revolutionary moment and that type of consciousness which would be indispensable to assure the continuity of a political project of social transformation, which would be pragmatic enough to reveal itself in the different stages of its realisation.

As a matter of fact there was no contradiction between the cultural models that were part of the framework of a mythical thinking such as the majority of the rural population would have and that

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Due to the old technology, the factory produced a terrible noise. Most workers would suffer ear problems after a few months of employment. As a result of bombardments by the Americans the factory had lost its ventilation and dust absorption systems which had been replaced with makeshift means. Even though the work rhythm was moderate and the social benefits rather good, it could not be expected that the workers would have a conscience that was very different from that of workers in capitalist countries (at the beginning of the country). The propaganda and the slogans were ineffective. The objective conditions that unfortunately could not be changed due to material constraints of the society, conditioned people's mentality and the creation of the cultural models.

In the rural communities, the cultural evolution was more adequate as the material transformation was realised progressively with the contribution of the rural population. In contrast to what happened in many south and south-east Asian countries, the agricultural culture

belonging to the revolutionary movement. But this type of vision did not allow for a level of abstraction necessary to outgrow the micro dimension of the perceived social space; to pass from what is "immediately perceived to foresight" as it was called by P. Bourdieu (*passer de la prévoyance a la prévision*). This vision in other words was not sufficient to reproduce the Sandinista project. This was not the only reason why they lost the elections but it certainly has influenced the events.

One of the results of the revolution in Nicaragua was in fact the development of what could be called a new middle class. The opening of educational facilities and more particularly of the university to the popular classes, the increased role of the State especially in the fields of education and health resulted in the considerable growth of an urban middle class. While being the fruit of the revolution, this group was not necessarily the main bearer of its values—often on the contrary. Professional success, family wellbeing, a certain level of consumption became the core of the valorisation which was mainly

centred on and preoccupied with the individual and the family. Inevitably, for many, this clashed with the collective values put forward by the Sandinista revolution.

Ethics

The same holds in the field of ethics. While drawing up a new collective morality, the new man was the point of reference for aspirations and behaviour. But this is true only for a minority ready to sacrifice their own interest for the benefit of the group. The values and the norms of behaviour and consequently the practices were soon in contradiction with the collective objectives, especially in situations of deprivation. This reminds me of a conversation I had in the Ho Chi Minh City with one of the high officials of the communist party and the archbishop Mgr. Binh who replied to some of the former's statements saying: "I would be so glad if

(irrigation, means of communication) to respond to their needs in the form of cooperatives.

Hence there is a dialectic relationship between culture and material foundation. The latter cannot be transformed without a project that first emerges in the mind, whether it corresponds to individual interests or to a collective project. A mode of production can never become a reproducible reality without establishing the proper material bases. The failure of societies in the East is probably to be found in that direction.

Religion

Within the framework of culture we would also like to touch on the question of religion. For a long time the anti-religious struggle and atheism were advanced as almost compulsory factors for a revolutionary process. But for some time there has been a change attitude. It

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the communists would believe a little more in original sin."

Does all this take us away from a materialist position in our analysis? On the contrary. It enables us to show the importance of the establishment of material foundations for the reproduction of society. In the long run one cannot reproduce social relationships on a voluntary basis even if there is a consensus. The capitalist system is a striking example. As long as the relationship between capital and labour can be reproduced on its material foundation, the system is not endangered and can allow a certain amount of freedom such as freedom of press, education, religion, political parties, art and philosophy. If on the contrary the system is not safeguarded by such a pillar and needs the juridical, political and even the religious systems for support, democracy is at risk.

From a different point of view, this was also the experience of the rural cooperatives in the delta of the Red Stream. There the farmers entered into the collective system because the State had created the necessary infrastructure

is being remembered that Marx reproached the radical atheists—disciples of Feuerbach—the "theological" character of their way of thinking.

When religion was used as the ideological support base of the class society and to the extent it was used as such, the struggle against religions was compulsory in the context of revolutionary upheavals. This holds for the religious content as well as for the institutions or churches. But how many mistakes have been made in these areas? Pre-analytic beliefs often expressed in religious codes cannot be fought with decrees and ukases. The religious aspect of culture is changed as a result of social changes and can become a favourable foundation for social change as was numerous religious movements and even in theological trends at the periphery of western capitalism.

In regions with incomplete form of capitalism i.e. where the whole of the workforce is not submitted to the capital because this is not yet needed in the actual stage of accumulation, pre-capitalist forms of social reproduction remain prevalent. Hence the importance of

religion. To ignore this would not be a materialist stand and anything but a dialectic one. It would be worthwhile to study the history of the obstacles to the revolutionary process of the masses in the light of opinions of revolutionary movements and political parties on religion.

Atheism can be understood as a movement of reaction against concrete situations or as a personal conviction. Atheism as a compulsory transition towards socialism (scientific atheism) or as a state ideology is the fruit of the institutionalisation of an historic moment or worse as the imposition of a middle class ideology on the masses who do not feel concerned if it is not the certitude, necessary for the cultural reproduction of the functionaries of the system. As for the religious institutions, they are to a great extent involved in the social reproduction of the pre-socialist and especially of the pre-capitalist social systems. Therefore they could not but link up in a stronger way with the counter-revolutionary forces. John Paul II condemns socialism in its essence in his latest encyclical letter socialism, because he identifies socialism with atheism (He also chastises capitalism for its abuses). Whatever the truth of the argument, it is significant that it can be used.

We can conclude saying that cultural factors should not be neglected and should be included systematically in the theoretical reflection, in empirical research and in politics without separating them from the whole.

3. The Need for a Global Analysis

In a workshop organised in May 1990 at the Sorbonne by the magazine "ACTUEL MARK" on the theme: "Death of Communism and Marxism up to date?" it was striking to see the extent of preoccupation with Europe. In the context of recent events this can be understood. But there is a real danger on this at the theoretical level and a political trap. Marxist thinking is impossible without reaching global dimensions of the analysis. At the same time we need to broaden the perspective of time.

We need not enter into details to be convinced that the capitalist system is worldwide. On the economical level we cannot separate Europe from its links with the third world. The Western

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proletariat and certainly its sub-proletariat is to be found in other continents. The logic of the economic system ensure the indirect submission of labour to capital in the periphery. So we can never think of it without referring to the totality of its relationships.

The global nature of its reality is expressed in a new stage of the class struggle. Certain people affirm—and it is an interesting hypothesis—that one day the new technologies will enable to construct the material foundations for socialism. However we see that these technologies are being used by a worldwide middle class exactly to establish the material conditions of its existence as a class. Information and communication

give the necessary instruments to this global middle class who begins to exist as a separate class. As a result we see the breaking up of subordinate classes and the nonexistence at this level of a State which could form a counterweight for exploitation.

If at the theoretical level it is necessary to include the global dimension it is not less important at the level of short-term political action. The creation of the European Community of the Europe of the twelve in 1991 and the gradual integration of the countries of Eastern Europe in the economy of the Community will necessarily reinforce the mechanisms of dependency in the third world countries. We therefore should fight against any Euro-centrism both in intellectual trends and in politics.

The effects that events in the Eastern Europe could have on countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America that have chosen an alternative route of development should also not be neglected. We can see three levels of consequences.

The accent on economic efficiency implies different mechanisms at the economic level: the introduction of a certain number of trends; the insistence on productivity and profit, the concentration of economic means on internal investments, the call for external investments, the progressive integration into the global market. This could lead to numerous effects: economic aid that will become less available and even might be abandoned, the need to keep to strict economic laws in the relationships and in the economic cooperation at the expense

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minimum use of due to the limited rainfall in this location.

The highland plots in the KOISP site, visually, were extremely dry on the surface. The application of simple tools to this hard pan might not effect the required tillage depth wise or texture wise. In order to work this hard pan it is assumed that large quantities of water have to be applied to moisten the soil layers. This is anticipated would be conducive to till the surface with simple tools/equipment available to the farmer-settler-operator in the current context, at the KOISP.

In order to withdraw the highland plot from being a liability to the farmer-settler-operator instead of the initial intention of the project to make this parcel of land an asset whereby the farmer-settler-operator could derive an income, the following approaches are suggested; (1) to provide an alternative source of water for highland irrigation instead of the farmer-settler-operator depending totally on rainfall for cultivation, and (2) to terminate the distribution of highland plots to the individual farmer-settler-operator and retain the highland plots in a unit block for other ventures such as; (a) establishing infrastructure to promote industry — agri based or otherwise — where the off season labour of the farmer-settler-operator community could be utilised and the individuals engaged in such industries could supplement their personal incomes and (b) the highland holding could be cultivated with orchard crops viz. Mango, Wood Apple, vegetables etc. which could be used as raw material for agri-industries if the markets for such processed products are established. Investigations could also be made

to identify aspirations, needs and plans of the farmer-settler-operators and in the event of the said wanting to set up their own enterprises based on the prior knowledge and skills in their possession, credit and other support services could be extended for such purpose.

If approach 1 is considered the action required would be to provide a source of water for highland irrigation. The sources as observed, are limited. The use of surplus water from the reservoir in the event of a cropping plan being introduced where the provision of water for the lowland plots could be economised, is suggested as an alternative.

Another alternative would be to utilise another source of water in the vicinity which in the current context serves a limited purpose. For example the lagoon; in this instance costs have to be borne to desalinate water from the source for use. Anyhow, the feasibility of the two approaches have to be investigated if the necessity to irrigate highland plots is in question.

Element 4: Post harvest technology/techniques:

Post-harvest techniques are generally removed from Farming systems as they are not directly related to farming/cropping in the technical sense. Anyhow, the importance of blending this element with the above elements is that the identification of varieties for cultivation is based on the type of post-harvest technique envisaged of the said crop produce; eg. rice varieties have to be considered for each of the purpose in use ie. raw rice milled or parboiled rice milled for consumption. The qualities of the varieties have to differ to meet the varied purposes

of the users and therefore specific varieties have to be identified to meet these specific purposes.

Therefore, the necessity to consider post harvest technology/techniques as an integrated component of farming systems.

Element 5: Market links/Markets:

This element is vital when crop production is generally market oriented. As in the case of element 4 this element again determines the crops and the specific varieties that have to be cultivated at the field level. This influence of the markets on the crops and varieties is further extended to the field through the market demand for processed products of said crops. Therefore, the link of the market to the farming system is balanced based on the regular market forces, demand and supply, for crop produce and crop based products, to meet the need of the consumer.

In a commercial farming system the whole production process depends entirely on this element; to sustain the two way returns, income to the farmer-producer and the availability and choice of agricultural produce to the consumer at affordable costs.

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of social and political aspects, the introductions of the mechanisms as the market economy while dropping the regulating mechanisms of a planned economy including the relations with the third world, an alliance with the economic powers which exploit the third world and prevent its development.

From a political point of view the disarmament is surely positive for all but it also implies serious risks. Among others we see the fighting of local conflicts at the expense of popular struggle for emancipation, local governments being pressurised to drop their political programmes such as the agrarian reform, the acceptance of geo-political distribution of the influence with a larger scope for the capitalist powers, a slowing down of the revolu-

tionary movements in the third world because solidarity is too expensive which in turn could lead towards a radicalisation of these movements and thus eventually to historical deadlocks. In one word, what should be feared is the reduction of political counterweight.

Finally at the level of reflection the fact that certain theoretical marxist expects have been given less evidence or even have been abandoned is not very promising. If imperialism as a stage of capitalism is no longer mentioned it also does no longer allow third world societies to re-integrate into the world system. The theory of transition could be weakened by a greater insistence on the ecology and the relationships with nature than on the social relationships.

These are a few fears of the third world and it looks as if the events of the recent months prove them right. Only the globalization of our analysis will keep us on the alert, ready to answer those questions.

In conclusion we would like to say that the marxist reflection has still a lot of tasks to accomplish. It is far from exhausted and could find new vigour. Moments of crisis are in fact privileged moments for renewal of the reflection. Besides, reflection can liberate itself from the institutional harness and take up once more its function of theoretical questioning of reality. The moment has come to develop reflection in untouched or nearly untouched fields such as culture.