

LECTURE 13

The Meaning of Communism

The meaning of communism can be very difficult indeed to determine. We are confronted with a bewildering array of labels and qualifications, Marxism, Leninism, Marxism-Leninism, Maoism, Titoism, Council Communism, Anarchist Communism, and Christian Communism. . . . and so on. Things get even more confusing when you add the word 'Socialism' to the mix.

In the sense in which I was using the words 'Socialism' and 'Socialist' last week there is no substantial difference between the words 'Communism' and 'Communist'. Both sets of words belong to a common tradition arising *in its modern form* in Western Europe in the period between the late 1820s and the late 1840s.

A distinction is sometimes made in which 'Socialism' is conceived as a transitional stage upon the road to a *final destination* known as 'Communism'. Other distinctions have been made in which the word 'Socialism' is aligned rather more with representative democracy than with the form of working class government known as 'the Dictatorship of the Proletariat'.

Indeed, phrases like 'Parliamentary Socialism' and 'Democratic Socialism' have also been widely used by those who wish merely to modify or restrain the operation of market forces by various forms of state ownership and regulation, and by the institution of social insurance and the establishment of welfare systems.

At any rate it is as well to be aware of the difficulties inherent in using the terms 'Socialist and Socialism'; terms which can be used to describe Gordon Brown, or at least the mainstream of the British Labour Party, *and* those socialists currently engaged in building the Socialist Workers' Party.

The words 'Communist' and 'Communism' present similar difficulties, not least because the socialists building the Socialist Workers' Party would cheerfully agree that they are *indeed* Communists, just as readily as the leaders of the Chinese People's Republic continue to call their *party-state apparatus* 'Communist'. In a similar fashion many Anarchists *are* Communists and would count it as no disgrace to be called 'Socialists'.

Consequently, there is no definitional (or dictionary) solution to this problem. *Nothing short of learning as much about the political history of the working class and of the labour movement as you can will suffice.*

Lecture 13: The Meaning of Communism.

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Understanding the relationships between different trends and different historical contingencies is essential in order to be able to make useful distinctions between different kinds of socialists and different kinds of communists.

With these caveats in place, I am deploying the words Socialist and Communist, *interchangeably*, as terms for those struggling for a transitional form of society destined eventually fully to realise the age-old communist dream of equality and social harmony in the abolition of both class divisions and of the state, to which it is argued, these class divisions give rise.

In short Communism means participatory democracy in which both the social determination of necessity, and the social allocation of all material and human resources, will replace both private property and the operation of the market.

This Communist form of participatory democracy is conceived as an expression of the popular or general will and rests upon a mode of universal equality achieved through the abolition of private property. In principle all will be equal because all will be propertyless. All will, according to their capacity and ability, play an equal part in the production of social wealth. As a consequence, all will have an equal share, *according to their needs*, in the wealth of society.

[SOME MIGHT GET MORE, SOME, LESS]

Because the formal legal equality enjoyed by citizens of modern liberal states does little or nothing to address the vast inequality in the distribution of wealth and power Communists want to abolish the distinction between the political sphere and the economic sphere. They want to bring all economic activity into the political sphere by abolishing private property and making all decisions affecting resources the subject of direct political decisions by assemblies of working people and their families.

Through the act of abolishing the market in goods and services, they would also abolish the labour market. Henceforth the quantity, quality and price of all goods and services would be democratically decided. This would, of course, include the price of labour. Consequently, the level of wages and the distribution of jobs and the necessary levels of education and training would be democratically decided. The exact manner in which such a planned economy was administered and the relationship between the workers' assemblies, and experts and functionaries should not detain us for the time being.

In principle, Communism would usher in a planned economy in which managers, economists, statisticians, actuaries, technicians, planners, and scientists of all sorts, employed by the workers' assemblies, would run the economy according to detailed strategic plans drawn up by the workers and their families.

This Communist plan presupposes or assumes that society in the form of the democratic assemblies would be capable of determining what was meant, at any given moment, for any given community, and any given individual, by *needs*. What each person or each community was thought to *need* in the way of material goods, services, leisure, and so on, would be democratically determined by the workers' assemblies and set out in the plan.

Consequently, the plan for Communist society presupposes or assumes the democratic allocation of all resources. Raw materials, fuel, machinery, vehicles, buildings, components, finished goods, and so on, would be allocated democratically according to rational plans drawn up by the workers' assemblies. The principal resource of any society, its human labour power, would, in the absence of a labour market, also become the subject of democratic decision-making. Wages would be fixed at rates determined by the assemblies. Jobs, and the requisite levels and training and education, would be distributed democratically according to the plan. The chaos and vagaries of the labour market with its accompanying waste and unemployment would be replaced by full employment and the direction of labour according to the plan.

From this account of Communism it will be readily seen what enormous potential there is for *the tyranny of the general will* to impose upon society *the tyranny of the plan* and the *tyranny of the managers and experts* charged with implementing the plan. For if the decisions of the workers' assemblies are just and rational, *how could any reasonable person object to them?* Similarly, if the managers and experts were faithfully carrying out the democratic plan, i.e., 'the will of the people', it would be *unreasonable* for any good citizen to refuse to cooperate with the plan.

[The General Will vs The Will of All – the “will of all” is, of course inferior to the General Will because it is merely the sum of individual wills – whereas the General Will represents in more perfect form the will of society] [Jean Jacques Rousseau – *The Social Contract* 1762/ Bk.1.Ch 6/ Bk.2.Ch 3.]

The Institute for Workers Control, and most recently Hilary Wainwright of the Transnational Institute in Amsterdam, has done much work on the problem of deepening participatory democracy. There is a substantial literature on industrial participation, co-operation, and workers control. However, this work is at its strongest when it is discussing how to arrange the democratic or co-operative management of individual workplaces, or in

developing popular participation in local planning and government administration in cities like Porto Alegre or Fortaleza in Brazil.

[HILARY WAINWRIGHT AND SHIELA ROWBOTHAM
‘POPULAR PLANNING DEPARTMENT OF THE GLC AND
THE PEOPLE’S PLAN FOR LONDON DOCKLANDS] [FOR THE
MOST IMPORTANT CONTEMPORARY WORK ON ‘NON-
CAPITALIST’ ECONOMIES – SEE WORK ON PARECON:
PARECON: LIFE AFTER CAPITALISM, Michael Albert, Verso
Books – have a look at the parecon pages at Zmag. See the Anti-Cap
website – Documents page]

However, discussion of the transition from workers’ control of the workplace to *workers’ self-management of the economy as a whole* has been much less detailed and much less successful.

Consequently, the problem of how to overcome the tyranny inherent in the popular planning of the entire national, regional, or even of the global economy, has not received much attention since the disintegration of State Communism and State Planning in the two years 1989 to 1991.

So, to recap, Communism, means establishing the political power and the democratic institutions capable of abolishing the market and introducing:

1. THE SOCIAL (OR DEMOCRATIC) DETERMINATION OF NECESSITY
2. THE SOCIAL (OR DEMOCRATIC) ALLOCATION OF RESOURCES
3. THE SOCIAL (OR DEMOCRATIC) DIRECTION OF LABOUR

This Communist vision of a society in which all would, as far as possible, participate equally in both the creation of social wealth and in its enjoyment, has assumed many forms different throughout history. It has been the vision of radical priests of peasant rebels and of atheistical shoemakers and artisans for centuries. Famously, John Ball, the Lollard¹ priest, is supposed to have said in the course of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381:

When Adam delved and Eve span, Who was then the gentleman?
From the beginning all men by nature were created alike, and our
bondage or servitude came in by the unjust oppression of naughty
men. For if God would have had any bondmen from the beginning,
he would have appointed who should be bond, and who free. And
therefore I exhort you to consider that now the time is come,

¹ The word Lollard refers to numerous early protestant groups, preachers, and ‘heretics’ (c1350 to 1530) who believed in the ‘community of the faithful’ rather than the official forms or organizations of the church, they believed that the leaders of the church should practice vows of poverty and that church property and income should be taxed.

appointed to us by God, in which ye may (if ye will) cast off the yoke of bondage, and recover liberty.²

Modern Communism, of course, is the multifarious creation of nineteenth century Socialists, Co-operators, Anarchists, Christians and Marxists; of Guild Socialists and Syndicalists, of Spartacists, Council Communists, and Situationists. However, because of the enormous prestige of the Marxist leaders of the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917, of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Bukharin, of Stalin, and so on, the different forms and interpretations of Marxism presented, by Engels, by Plekhanov, by Lenin, by Trotsky and by Stalin and Mao Zedong, became very influential.

In fact, they became so influential that they came to represent what Communism stood for. Consequently, for many people Communism and Marxism are synonymous. Of course, in many areas of academic life, in the Universities and among Western intellectuals, particularly those working in literature, philosophy, in political science and sociology, Marxism has a theoretical and intellectual interest (and a status), which is independent of practical or political Communism.

However, in practical politics, in the labour movement, and in the broader anti-capitalist movement, Marxism and Communism were, at least until 1989, synonymous; Marxism and Communism amounted to the same thing.

This meant that Communism came to be seen by many people as an *historical necessity*. The *necessity of Communism* arose from the working out of profound historical processes at work in the formation and development of human society.

In Marx's *The Thesis On Feuerbach*, 1845, Marx and Engels's, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, of 1848, in Marx's *Preface to The Critique of Political Economy*, 1859, in Volume One of Marx's *Capital*, 1867, Engels's *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, 1880, and in Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, 1884, the founders of what they liked to think of as 'scientific socialism' elaborated what they regarded as the new science of 'Historical Materialism'. [MARX/ENGELS Selected Works in one volume]

The fundamental elements of Historical Materialism are:

1. That human beings make their own conditions of existence through their social production

² R B Dobson, *The Peasants revolt of 1381*, Pitman: Bath, 1970, pp373-375 quotes from Thomas Walsingham's *Historia Anglicana*.

2. That in the course of this social production of our existence we produce definite relations of production which, *although we produce them*, are independent of our will

[So, the idea is that we produce our own life, but not in conditions of our own making – nature/technical level/and the corresponding relations – Slavery (Labour Saving Devices)]

3. That these relations of production – which are in effect class relations – i.e., definite relations between the producers – constitute the ‘economic foundation’ of society upon which arises a legal, political and cultural ‘superstructure’, which shapes the nature of our consciousness.

The consequence of this outlook was to provide Marxists with a means of historical analysis and a worldview that places class relations at the heart of historical development. The relations of production are characterised as the relations between antagonistic classes:

[MANIFESTO pp.34-5]

As society develops from the slavery of antiquity to feudalism and from feudalism to capitalism the development of the forces of production – the level of technique and the processes of material production come, in one way or another, into conflict with the ‘relations of production’, i.e., with the class structure, which results in class struggles of such intensity that a new or emergent class will come to rule society or the struggle will, in effect, result in ‘the common ruin of all the contending classes’.

So, here, within the fundamental forces at work in the creation of both human culture and human consciousness, lies the revolutionary *motive force* of historical development, by the operation of which, one form of class rule gives rise to a succeeding form of class rule – driven on by the development of the productive forces which in turn demand a revolutionary rearrangement of the social relations of production – the slavery of ancient states gave way to feudalism, and feudalism gives rise to capitalism, and capitalism will give rise to communism.

The reason that capitalism will give rise to communism is because the capitalist mode of production brings into existence a vast class of wage workers – the working class – and there is a tendency within the capitalist system constantly to add to this working class as tribal people, peasants, and independent artisans, and small businessmen are driven out of business and into the working class. Increasingly, society is divided between a vast class of wagedworkers on the one hand, and a tiny class of big capitalists, on the other.

The nature of developments in material production – from robotics and automation to economic and ecological crises – will result in an increasingly sharp struggle between the working class and the capitalist class. The very nature of capitalist development in both its drive for growth, regardless of the environmental consequences, and in its drive for automation regardless, of unemployment, will intensify the class struggle.

This struggle will result in the creation of communism because the mass character of the working class and the nature of its experience of the production process will result in the development of collective forms of ownership and control – the workers cannot break up the industries and firms in which they work and ‘divide the spoils between themselves’ – the working class could only emancipate itself *collectively* by taking over the means of production and administering the factories, offices, and the transportation and communications networks, on behalf of society as a whole.

According to this account of Historical Materialism, in giving rise to the working class the capitalist system of production will give rise either to communism or to the ruin of the contending classes – So, for the Communist, the lesson of Historical Materialism is either the fight for Communism or to suffer the wholesale destruction of society.

The apocalyptic nature of this choice has, of course, changed over time. In the 1930s for example, the choice was between Communism (on the one hand), and economic collapse, fascism, and war (on the other). In the event millions of people got something very like the apocalypse *and* a rather grim version of its antidote.

Today, the choice is said to be between the fight for Communism and the destruction of society in war and ecological disaster.

[More recently, of course, thirties-like intimations of ruin have begun to re-emerge.]

What is important to understand is that according to this process of reasoning *necessity*, ‘the necessity of Communism’, is not produced by our *desire* for it, but by ‘historical necessity’ itself. The nature of capitalist development is such that it will either be replaced by the working class (which capitalism itself brought into existence), or the headlong development of the capitalist forces and relations of production will result in the destruction of society itself.

Consequently, the struggle for Communism is both the struggle of the working class for control of society on behalf of both itself and, indeed, *for society as a whole*. It is in this sense, that the interests of the working class are the interests of society and of all human kind.

The political certainty of seasoned Communists arises not from some *imagined* predisposition of human beings for ‘goodness and common sharing’ but from the social processes at work in the development of society. As Marx put it in his ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, “the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of social relations.”

This means that human beings do not have some abstract ‘human nature’ (characterised by greed, competitiveness, or selfishness), but a nature and a consciousness, produced within a definite set of social relations. Consequently, the collective consciousness which arises and which can be strengthened through experience of collective political struggle will produce a consciousness, which will correspond to the new collective and Communist relations of production.

This realisation of the Communist collective mode of production will bring both the *forces* and the *relations* of production together – it will abolish the conflict between classes and consequently it will abolish the conflict between the material and technical capacities of human beings, and the *social obstacles* (like private property and the profit motive), which prevent us from making full use of them.

The state, which is also a product of the struggle between classes, will also disappear along with the disappearance of classes and hence the disappearance of antagonism between classes.

The resulting Communist harmony will *not* arise simply or even from the ‘good intentions’ of people in society but from the harmonious relations that will have been established between the *forces* of production and the *relations* of production.

Communism, which means participatory democracy in which the social determination of necessity and the social allocation of all material and human resources will, according to Communists, of necessity replace the drive for profits, the disorder and waste brought by the market, and the war and ecological disaster that is an inevitable consequence of capitalist competition.