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Lecture 5: Marxism and the Inner History of the Russian Revolution.

1. The October Revolution and the Five Year Plans.

In our bird's eye view of the last quarter century, we dated the setting in of rapid and radical change with the beginning of the Nineteen-thirties. The 'Twenties we described as a conservative period still mainly dominated by Nineteenth century ideals.

Superficially, it might seem as if an exception would have to be made for the Russian Revolution. But in actual fact, this great event was no more than the continuation of the French revolution on Russian soil. It was only with the Five Year Plans and the collectivization of the farms that something essentially new entered into the history of Western civilization. This, however, did not happen until the early 'Thirties, when the Age of Transformation started on a planetary scale.

This approach, which naturally follows from our general propositions, raises a number of questions. If the October Revolution of 1917 did not aim at introducing socialism into Russia, why did this revolution take on a socialist character, at least for a time? And what connection was there, if any, between the first period of the Russian revolution, 1917-1923, and the Five Year Plan period dating from 1928, which deliberately aimed at making Russia a socialist country?

The official presentations of the Russian revolution are too inaccurate to be of any use on this point. They differ widely even from one another as the successive stages of the revolution call for new justifications. The official history of the Communist Party omits to mention a number of decisive events and bears but little reference to the facts. The Trotskyist literature, again, misrepresents the Five Year Plan period almost as badly as the Stalinist literature misrepresents the October Revolution. Also its interpretations of Marxism follow too closely on the lines of the traditional doctrine to be of much help in forming a judgment on the relevance of Marxism to socialist thought in general.

A study of the original documents is the only safe way of approach. This will include Lenin's speeches and articles, also some of his earlier works, as, e.g., that on the Land question; some speeches and articles of Stalin; Trotsky's historical works, especially his short account of the October Revolution, published in England in 1919; John Reed's "Ten Days"; as well as Rosa Luxemburg's and K. Kautsky's contemporary criticisms. For the intermediate period 1923-1928 the official reports of the conferences of the Party are the main sources of reference.

2. General outline.

The October Revolution of 1917 regarded itself as, and actually was, a continuation of the Western revolutions of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Accordingly, the leaders of the October revolution were reluctant to introduce socialist elements into their program and, subsequently, did so only under the pressure of circumstances. This is emphatically true of Lenin himself, by the time of whose death 'war communism' was an episode of the past and the October Revolution had virtually spent itself. Tsarism was no more; the land was owned by the peasant; the various nations had been liberated from the domination of Great Russia. Nothing remained to be done but to settle down to some advanced form of agrarian democracy.

But the overthrow of autocracy had come at a time when the middle classes themselves were already too suspicious of popular democracy in Europe to give whole-hearted support to the revolution. Thus the industrial workers of the towns became the bearers of the revolt with the tragic result that their political self-preservation became identified with the survival of the revolution itself. However, the fact remained that agriculture, not manufacture, was backward Russia's main industry and this industry could not be reconciled to the political power of the workers. The market-economy of the country-side suffered increasingly from the interference of the state, which had nationalized the manufacturing industries, while these industries on their part were all but strangled by the sabotage of the country-side. Still, given a functioning international system, both political and economic, of which Russia could form a part, and these tensions might well have been overcome in time.

But, by the end of the 'Twenties, when Russia was ripe for normalization--return to the world market on a large scale; joining the Kellogg Pact--the international system was already at the breaking point. Five Year Plan Russia was thus ultimately the result not of forces operating in Russia alone, but of a general trend at work both inside and outside Russia at the critical period.

3. Bolsheviks and Narodniki.

Marxian theory of history culminated in a veritable time-table of economic development. Upon feudalism, capitalism must follow, and upon capitalism, socialism. There can be no 'skipping;' for the sequence is determined by the development of the means of production. Socialism presupposes an abundant supply of capital in the form of plant and machinery, which cannot be present in a backward agrarian feudal society. No society can pass from feudalism to socialism without having first passed through capitalism. Socialists stand for economic evolution: therefore, in a feudal country they stand for capitalism, in a capitalist country for socialism.

In backward agrarian Russia this outlook was of first importance. Ever since the 'Eighties the chief opponents of the Marxists had been the Narodniki (populists or folk-socialists, we might call them), who denounced the endeavour to introduce capitalism into Russia as a piece of fantastic and immoral pedantry. The Marxist retort was that the Narodnik was a reactionary who was hiding his hatred of machinery and progress behind a sentimental denunciation of capitalism. A Russian Marxist thus identified his whole personality and outlook with the program of introducing capitalism into Russia by the overthrow of Tsarism and the destruction of the feudal land-owning system. The French revolution which established the rule of the bourgeoisie, that was the need of the hour in Russia. Any other aim would have been denounced as sheer adventurism, if not as camouflaged reaction.

But what exactly, then, should the task of a socialist party in the overthrow of Tsarism be?

The answer was: To carry the bourgeois revolution to its utmost limits, so as to prevent counter-revolution and to secure the common people their full democratic rights; this would prevent the bourgeoisie from defrauding the workers of their share of the common victory, as had happened in some revolutions of the past. But at the same time, socialists should not countenance economic demands in the name of the workers, for this would introduce a socialist element into the revolution--a premature

step, which must inevitably lead to defeat and to the victory of the counter-revolution.

The Marxian doctrine as we may see imposed a very serious measure of self-limitation upon the leaders of the Russian working class movement.

4. Lenin's interpretation of the doctrine.

In February 1917 the long-expected bourgeois revolution had taken place in Russia, the Tsar had been forced to resign, and the so-called Provisional Government under Kerenski was set up. It was supported to a greater or lesser extent by all the peasant and working class parties, until Lenin's return from exile in the first days of April.

Lenin's opposition to the Provisional Government was a completely new line to the Party. He argued that unless the working class was vigilant, the War would be continued; the revolution would be stopped; and counter-revolution would be successful. He opposed any violent action against the Provisional Government, which had the support of the Petrograd Soviet, but pressed for a Bolshevik control of the Soviets (in which they had but a very few representatives). The control of the Soviets through the Bolsheviks would be the best guarantee for the forcing of the bourgeois revolution to its utmost limits.

5. Trotsky and the 'permanent revolution'.

Trotsky alone had foreseen that the revolution in Russia would not be a purely middle class revolution. He inferred this from the nature of world development in our time. He argued that the overthrow of Tsarism would become a world event; that although Russia in the course of this event would move towards socialism, she could not successfully establish it; but that, in the long run, she would be saved from the consequences of her own backwardness by the world revolution and the subsequent victory of socialism in the more advanced countries of Western Europe. This is the theory of the 'permanent revolution'. It brought the orthodox Marxian theory of social development into line with the policy of Russian socialists who were trying to formulate their tasks in a coming middle class revolution.

6. The Bolsheviks forced to take socialist measures.

Accordingly, the course of the October Revolution ran through a series of contradictions. The main function of the revolution was achieved on traditional lines: Tsarism was destroyed; feudal forms of land-owning were abolished; the races of the Empire were freed from the domination of the Great Russians. But the actual institutional development was very different from that originally intended by the Bolsheviks.

Their three main points of policy had been: Democratic Republic; nationalization of the land; industrial capitalism. Actually, neither of these points was achieved: a) the Constituent Assembly was dissolved before it started to function and the Democratic Republic was thus indefinitely postponed; b) the nationalization of the land meant the renting of the land to the peasants by the State, a point on which Lenin especially insisted as the purest form of a capitalist land tenure; nothing came of it, as the peasants were determined to own the land themselves and the Bolsheviks had to give way; c) the refusal of the Bolsheviks to countenance any economic

demands of the workers was in vain for the disorganization of production and the subsequent sabotage of the owners forced them step by step to take over one industry after another.

For a short time it seemed as if Russia would go socialist. By the middle of 1918 industry was nationalized and under the pressure of foreign intervention 'war communism' started. This was a genuine attempt to abolish money and the market and to institute an economy of state-barter. It ended with the terrible disaster of the famine. Lenin proclaimed the necessity of a return to capitalism and declared that 'war communism' had been a departure from all the Party had ever taught on the transition to socialism.

With the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 the free market for grain was restored. But unless this breathing space could be used to bring about a world revolution, the political victory of the peasants could not be prevented and the power of the industrial workers would have to go. This was the view of Lenin.

7. The intermediate period.

For almost five years the decision was postponed. During this period the original drive of the October Revolution had ceased. In order to maintain themselves the urban workers were interfering increasingly with the peasant food supplies and with the agricultural raw materials of industry. But the manufacturing industries were too inefficient to maintain themselves on the basis of free exchanges, and thus they had to extend the range of State intervention in spite of its deleterious effects on their supplies. The choice seemed to be between the return to 'war communism' advocated by Trotsky, and the consistent continuation of the NEP with the acceptance of a free market economy and the liquidation of the power of the workers.

8. The Five Year Plans.

The actual decision was entirely different. It dropped the Marxian thesis of the impossibility of socialism in a backward agrarian country, and, in the Five Year Plans, started out to industrialize Russia on a socialist basis. No procedure more contrary to the Marxian philosophy of the determining influence of given economic conditions on policies could be imagined. That this line won through can hardly be explained by the Marxian ideologies of the leaders; in effect, the Five Year Plan Russia was the outcome of a new revolution. No wonder that very few of those engaged in the overthrow of Tsarism took part in this second revolution. The deliberate establishment of a socialist economy was apparently much more closely related to the Age of Transformation outside Russia than to the overthrow of Tsarism in 1917.

Still, the democratic inspiration of the October Revolution had a very important result. When the conflict of State and industry arose in Russia in acute form, the outcome was different from that in other countries of the Continent. In Russia the State took over the industrial system, adding agriculture to the sphere of the nationalized manufactures. In other countries, the institutions of democracy were abolished and the reform of the economic system was attempted under fascist leadership. It was the tragedy of Russia, and not of Russia alone, that in spite of the socialist forms of integration the democratic tendency succumbed in the long run to the totalitarian trend. This was due primarily to the overwhelming force of fascism under the external pressure of which Russia, perhaps only for the time being, changed from a potential democracy into a despotic totalitarian state.