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On the Question of Soviet Socialism*

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The following lines constitute my comments on Laibman’s review of van der Linden’s book, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union* (this journal, Vol. 73, No. 4, 2009). Not having had the privilege of reading the book itself and given the space constraint, I will focus on only one issue: Laibman’s position on Soviet socialism, specifically, his contention that Soviet socialist development is compatible with Marx’s Gotha critique (Marx, 1964), more particularly in the sense of the lower phase of communism, the “protracted period of evolutionary transition” based on “successful proletarian revolution and establishment of workers’ power” while retaining “the crucial features of the forces and relations” of capitalism such as “wage-labor” and “money and prices . . .” The following development is exclusively based on Marx’s own categories.

Before we treat the issue let me say a word on the terminological confusion around the term “socialism.” For Marx, socialism is neither the transition to communism, nor is it the lower phase of communism. It *is* communism *tout court*. In fact, Marx calls capitalism itself the “transitional point” or “transitional phase” to communism (1953, 438; 1962, 425–26; 1989, 783). The famous “political transition period” under proletarian rule is still within the “old organization of society,” as Marx reminded Bakunin (1873, 630). For Marx there is only one society after capital which he calls, in different texts,

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equivalently, communism, socialism, Republic of Labor, society of free and associated producers, or simply Association, Cooperative Society, (re)union of free individuals. We will limit reference to four texts where Marx speaks only of *socialism* as the designation of the future society, without mentioning “communism” at all: 1844, Anti-Ruge (1976a, 101–02); 1861–63, second notebook (1976b, 327); manuscript for *Capital* III (1992, 124–25); and his 1876 correction and revision of Most’s book, *Capital and Labor* (1989, 783–84).

Both ideas about socialism — contested here, but popularized (if not advanced) by Lenin in 1917 and accepted uncritically by his followers — were put to good use by the rulers of the regimes calling themselves “socialist” across the globe. They called their regimes “socialist” (to paraphrase Laibman) if only to make “Marxism compatible with the historical reality.” These ideas became convenient instruments of legitimizing every act — however repressive of the human individual — of these regimes in the name of building socialism, which was stressed as the need of the hour, thereby shelving all the (self-)emancipatory aspects of Marx’s socialism to the never-never-land of “communism,” metamorphosing Marx’s project into an unalloyed utopia with “romantic and millennial connotations,” in Laibman’s felicitous phrase.

Let us return to our issue. In the Gotha critique “wage labor” and “money and prices” are not among the “birth marks” of the old society which the lower stage of the new society carries over. (Of course these *were* the standing features of Soviet “socialism”). Does not Marx in the same text denounce the “system of wage labor” as a “*System der Sklaverei*” (a system of slavery) (1964, 21)? In fact, in *Capital* I, Marx equates capitalism as such with the “society of wage labor” (1987, 226), and, in the French version, as the “system of wage labor” or simply “wage labor” (1965, 770, 1113–14), as he had done earlier in the 1857–58 manuscript (1953, 635). Again, “labor as wage labor and conditions of labor as capital are the expression of the same relation, only viewed from different poles” (1962, 488). It would simply be a *contradictio in subjecto* to consider the existence of wage labor on the basis of the “associated mode of production” precisely replacing the capitalist mode of production. And it would be strange to suppose that after the disappearance of the capitalist class wage labor continues to exist. Did not Marx remind the workers in 1865 that the “abolition of the wages system” is identical with the “emancipation of the working class”? (1988, 432). As regards “money and prices,” no text of Marx shows existence of these categories in *socialism*. In the Gotha critique Marx’s focus, as regards the “lower phase,” is on the division of the social product between (re)production needs and consumption needs, where the first concerns replacement and extension of the means of production and the second concerns the needs of collective and personal consumption. As regards the latter, the principle governing it still remains the principle which regulates commodity exchange: the quantity of labor given to society by the individual

is received back from society (after necessary deductions) by the individual. However, the mediating “labor coupons” have no *exchange value*. In fact, in commodity production there is a contradiction between “principle and practice”; equivalence is established “*only on average*,” since the individual’s share in social total labor is unknowable. The opposite is the case with socialism (Marx, 1964, 16, emphasis in original). Precisely right at the beginning of the discussion, Marx reminds us that in the “co-operative society based on common ownership of means of production producers do not exchange their products; just as little does the labor employed on the products appear here *as the value* of these products” (emphasis in original). In Marx’s famous discussion of the socialist society in *Capital* I, presented as the “*Verein freier Menschen*” (reunion of free individuals) in *opposition* to “a society of commodity producers,” we find basically the same model of allocation and distribution as in the Gotha critique’s “lower phase”: on the one hand, the socially planned distribution of labor time regulates the proportion of diverse functions in relation to diverse needs, while, on the other, “labor time measures the individual share of each producer in common labor as well as the share in the consumable part of the common product which comes back to the producer.” Here, again, under “socialized labor, diametrically opposed to commodity production,” the mediating labor certificates are not money; they simply ascertain the share allocated to each laboring individual — “only for the sake of a parallel with commodity production” — according to the individual’s labor time (1987, 109, 122). In the same way, in the second manuscript of *Capital* II Marx writes:

On the basis of socialised production . . . society distributes labor power and means of production in the different branches of industry (*Geschäftszweige*). The producers receive paper coupons with which they withdraw from the social consumption stock a quantity corresponding to their labor time. These coupons are *not money*. They do not circulate.” (2008, 347; emphasis added.)

Already in his 1857–58 manuscript, Marx makes the central point:

Under the supposition of communitarian production determination of time remains essential. . . . all economy is finally reduced to the economy of time. Society must distribute its time appropriately in order to obtain production in conformity with its total needs. Economy of time as well as planned distribution of labor time in the different branches of production remains, therefore, the first economic law on the basis of communitarian production. This is, however, essentially different from measuring of exchange value (labours or labor products) by labor time. (1953, 89.)

In other words there is no place for “money and prices” even in the “lower phase” of socialism. (*En passant*, this itself precludes the presence of wage labor in socialism.)

As to the claim of successful “proletarian revolution” and establishment of “workers’ power,” This appears to be simply Laibman’s assertion and — *given* Marx’s original meaning of these categories — it is impossible to accept such a claim. In October 1917, the fate of over 170 million people was decided by a handful of non-proletarian individuals, far removed from the real process of production and exploitation and not subject to free election and recall by the laboring people. Through the substitution of a whole class by a single party, power was seized — under the slogan “All Power to the Soviets” — not from the Provisional Government but really from the *Soviets themselves*, the authentic organs of laboring people’s self-rule created by the self-emancipatory country-wide spontaneous popular uprising in February. While the February uprising was, in terms of content, a bourgeois democratic revolution, it had, given its spontaneous mass character, the potential to go over, at a later phase — under appropriate material conditions — to an authentic socialist revolution, in Marx’s sense, if the laboring masses had been allowed unfettered freedom to continue, through their self-administering organs, their march forward. The Bolsheviks, putting a brake on the process, destroyed this great possibility, the greatest in the 20th century. This preemptive strike was perpetrated independently of and behind the back of the Congress of Soviets, thus depriving that Congress of the right to carry out the founding of the new order. A great authority on the soviets writes: “The usurpation of power on the eve of the meeting of the highest soviet organ signified at the same time the break of the Bolsheviks with soviet democracy. On the day of their highest triumph began the deprivation of the power of the soviets” (Anweiler, 1958, 242).

Revealing in this regard is Lenin’s secret correspondence to his comrades in the Party leadership (September–October 1917) expressing utter distrust of and disdain for the soviets, while mouthing “all power to the soviets” in public. “To wait for the Congress (to meet) is complete idiocy and total treachery (*polnaya izmena*). The Congress will give nothing and *can give nothing (nichevo ni mozhnet dat’)*” (Lenin, 1982, 345–46, emphasis in original). Undergoing a virtual radioactive decay, the soviets as independent self-governing organs of laborers evaporated as early as summer, 1918. “Soviet democracy lasted from October, 1917 to the summer of 1918 . . . beginning with 1919 Bolshevism started to deny all the dissidents of the revolution the right to political existence” (Serge, 2001, 832). As Carr notes, “after the summer of 1918 other political parties existed only on sufferance, their status becoming more and more precarious, and from 1921 onwards they virtually disappeared” (1964, 186). An eminent American historian wrote:

“All Power to the Soviets” appeared to be a reality on the 26th of October, 1917, but it was mostly power to the Bolsheviks in those soviets. . . . The whole system of

soviets and executive committees was reduced to an administrative and propaganda auxiliary of the party. . . . Deprived of power in the soviets and in the factories the Russian proletariat . . . found that the triumph of the dictatorship in its name was a very hollow victory. (Daniels, 1967, 223–24.)

The masses and the majority of soviets representing them certainly greeted the fall of the hated old regime, but refused to have a Bolshevik hegemony. Carr cites Lenin telling the party leaders only a few days before the seizure of power: “We cannot be guided by the mood of the masses that is changeable and unaccountable. The masses have given their confidence to the Bolsheviks and ask from them not words but deeds” (1964, 95). However, evidence suggests that right from the experience gained in the days of the successful struggle against Kornilov the laboring masses became more and more convinced that only the power of the soviets, and not of any particular political organization, could save the country from the dire situation in which it found itself. In his blow-by-blow account of the 1917 events in Russia the eminent historian Rabinowitch writes:

Spurred by the news of Kornilov’s attack, all political organizations to the left of the Kadets, every labor organization of any import, and soldier and sailor committees at all levels immediately rose to fight against Kornilov. It would be difficult to find in recent history a more powerful, and effective display of largely spontaneous and unified mass political action. . . . The defeat of Kornilov testified to the great potential power of the left and demonstrated once again the enormous attraction of the Bolshevik program. Yet it seems questionable to argue, as some do, that Kornilov’s defeat made Lenin’s victory inevitable. The mass mood was not specifically Bolshevik in the sense of reflecting a desire for a Bolshevik government. As the flood of post-Kornilov political resolutions revealed, Petrograd soldiers, sailors, and workers were attracted more than ever by the goal of creating a soviet government *uniting all socialist elements*. And *in their eyes* the Bolsheviks stood for soviet power — for soviet democracy. (2004, 139, 167, emphasis added.)

Very interestingly, on the eve of the Second Congress the delegates arriving in Smolny were asked to fill out questionnaires, where one finds that

an overwhelming majority of them (including the Bolshevik delegates) came to Petrograd committed to supporting the transfer of all power to the soviets, that is the creation of a soviet government presumably reflective of the party composition of the Congress. . . . They had the mandate to support the creation by the Congress of a coalition of government parties represented in the Soviet. (Rabinowitch, 2004, 291–93.)

Rabinowitch ends his superb, gripping account of the 1917 events thus:

It bears repeating that the Petrograd masses, to the extent that they supported the Bolsheviks in the overthrow of the Provisional Government, did so not out of any

sympathy for strictly Bolshevik rule but because they believed the revolution and the congress to be in imminent danger. Only the creation of a *broadly representative, exclusively socialist government* by the Congress of Soviets, which is *what they believed the Bolsheviks stood for*, appeared to offer the hope of insuring that there would not be a return to the hated ways of the old regime. (Rabinowitch, 2004, 314, emphasis added.)

Thus it appears that the immense majority of the delegates to the Congress and even the most advanced proletariat of the Bolshevik stronghold itself had a perspective of revolution very different from, if not opposed to, that of their supposed leaders.

Workers' discontent was mounting, and it was suppressed by force. The climax was reached with the mass massacre of the Kronstadt sailors and toilers in early 1921 on the totally false charge of their collaboration with the Whites, on Lenin's own testimony at the Tenth Congress of the Party in 1921. Deutscher writes that by 1921–22, for the first time since 1917, "the bulk of the working class unmistakably turned against the Bolsheviks. . . . If the Bolsheviks had now permitted free elections to the soviets they would almost certainly have been swept from power" (1963, 504). (Let me add that in 1917 Lenin had already declared that, once in power, "we will not let it go"). How could we then say that the Bolshevik seizure of power inaugurated a "successful proletarian revolution" in Russia?

By the same token we are unable to accept Laibman's claim that "workers' power" was "established" in that land. It is precisely this position which constitutes the "unexamined and unargued assumption" of Laibman. Similarly "unargued and unexamined" is his negation that workers there were separated from the means of production and political power. Rather than dragging on the argument at a rather abstract level, let us summon here some witnesses internal to the Soviet regime and hear what they say. An eminent soviet economist wrote: "Removed from direct administration and disposal of social ownership, having no influence on the system of remuneration, and participating in no way in the distribution of national income and produced product" the Soviet workers "perceived" such "state ownership" as "alien" and "not their own" (Butenko, 1988, 16, 18). Towards the end of the regime the doyen of labor economics underlined:

The state ownership was neither public nor socialist. Surplus labor and the corresponding surplus value belonged not to the people or to those who generated them. Profit was appropriated by the state. . . . the directors of enterprises hired labor power in the name of the state. The wage, in these conditions, was, as in any capitalist society, the transformed form of the value of labor power as a commodity (*prevrashchennoi formoi stoimosti tovara rabochaya sila*). (Manevich, 1991, 139.)

It is in this situation of "apathy enveloping millions" and "exhausting all motivational basis," as another economist observed, that the "standard

‘socialist toiler’ (*sotsialisticheskoi truzhenik*), a product of 70 years of Soviet rule,” has worked (Loginov, 1992).

A final witness on a different plane: Boris Pasternak, who speaks about the “inhuman reign of the lie (where) it was impossible to admit error; to conceal the failure people had to be cured, by every means of terrorism, of the habit of thinking and judging for themselves, and forced to see what did not exist, to assert the very opposite of what their eyes told them.” He also mentions the “promulgation of a constitution that was never meant to be applied, and the introduction of elections that violated the very principle of free choice” (1958, 422).

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Some Lessons from the Failed Transition to Socialism

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30 years ago I, along with Mike Goldfield, authored a book — *The Myth of Capitalism Reborn* — which was a polemic against the then-current Maoist thesis that capitalism had been restored in the Soviet Union. Mike and I were settling accounts with our Maoist past, and in doing so had to take up in depth the issues subsequently dealt with in van der Linden’s book *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union*, and in Laibman’s comments on it. While much of the detail in our work is historically dated, I believe our approach still yields some insight into a contemporary analysis of these questions, questions that remain important in the rebuilding of a significant socialist movement.

Laibman’s concluding position, that the USSR was formally socialist but never succeeded in attaining real socialism, is only briefly and too cryptically elaborated. Still, it seems close to our position that the Soviet Union was a society where the process of transition to socialism was initiated but never completed and consolidated, for reasons indicated in Laibman’s article. Our emphasis on “process” and “protracted transition,” I believe, is more historically and analytically fruitful than the static contrast between “formal” and “real,” but the positions seem pretty close and the difference is itself probably more formal than real.