

CHAPTER 7

HISTORICAL STAGES: A CRITIQUE

Over the course of this century, humanity has multiplied its knowledge of and control over nature and society many times. At the same time, it has also multiplied its degree of uncertainty in respect to its own destiny, values and fundamental beliefs. On the one hand, it has raised rationalism and humanism to heights never before attained. On the other, it has involved itself in extremely bloody, irrational wars and utilized mass extermination, from bacterial and chemical warfare to nuclear war and the gas chamber. It has developed a democratic conception of the world, based on liberty, respect for basic individual rights and political representation, while establishing overtly dictatorial and totalitarian regimes in almost every country in the world. It struggled for broad, democratic socialism, marked by equal opportunity and the full realization of human potential, but instead established narrow, bureaucratic regimes. It has reached levels of economic and technological development never before imagined and nevertheless maintains two-thirds of the world's population in misery. It urged cooperation, but international relations continue to be dominated by conflict.

In this world, at the same time rational and irrational, the dominant social formation is today technobureaucratic capitalism, where a new class - the technobureaucracy - shares power with the bourgeoisie. In order to understand this new class, it is essential to examine the profound technological transformations that made technical and organizational knowledge the new strategic factor of production.

1. The Strategic Factors of Production

The technical development of the means of production is always a new historical fact that forces society to reorganize its system of production. New technology implies new organization of production, new systems of authority and obedience. As a consequence, the entire social and political system changes. Social organization and institutions are transformed. New systems of domination emerge, as well as the need for new values and beliefs, new ideologies which legitimize the position of the new holders of power.

The development of the means of communication, from the creation of language and alphabets to electronic mass communication - film, radio, television - and the means of communication for decision-making - the computer - play also a decisive role in history. They permit an ever-growing spread of

knowledge and information. They also expand the potential for social control, on the level of society as a whole and on the level of the bureaucratic organizations, increasing the relations of power in favor of the dominant groups, who control the means of communication.

The control of these means and of the means of production are interdependent. Whoever controls one controls the other. The basic nature of the social structure will be defined by the factor of production which is historically strategic in relation to technological development. Political power and the system of domination will be defined in keeping with the control of the strategic means of production.

The idea of a strategic factor of production as a major factor in the definition of social and political structures was developed by John K. Galbraith. The strategic nature of a factor of production depends on its relative scarcity, be it induced or natural. In this respect Galbraith affirms:

It will now be clear what accords power to a factor of production or to those who own or control it. Power goes to the factor which is hardest to obtain or hardest to replace. In precise language it adheres to the one that has the greatest inelasticity of supply at the margin (1967: 51).

This is another, rather unorthodox way to express Marx's theory that technological development determines the relations of production or of power within a society. A factor is strategic or not depending on the level of development of the productive forces. When technological development results in a shift in the relative importance of determined factors of production, changes in the existing relations of production occur at the same time. Since society is governed by the economic principle of scarcity, relations of production dominate and determine all other social relations, including power relations. A modification in a strategic factor of production then, implies a change in the system of power within society. History enters a new stage, with new bosses, new institutions and new ideologies.

2. Stages of History

Marx stated that human history could be divided into eight great phases: primitive communism, the Asiatic mode of production, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and communism. The transitions from primitive communism to slavery, feudalism and capitalism may be clearly related to changes in strategic factors of production.

The transition from primitive communism to the Asiatic mode of production (the ancient river empires) and to slavery (Greece and Rome) was possible once farming and breeding techniques made it possible to create an economic surplus. When a worker was able to produce more than necessary for his own survival, slavery became possible: labor was the strategic factor of production.

As agricultural techniques continued to develop, the best lands were occupied, and production became more and more dependent on a minimum of motivation on the workers' part, feudalism emerged. At this point the strategic factor of production, the factor scarce at the margin, was no longer labor; it was land. Slave labor ceased to be economically advantageous and was replaced by serfdom. Landholding then became the source of power and wealth. The power granted to landowners continued throughout the Middle Ages.

By the end of the Middle Ages a new class and a new economic system were arising which would change the face of the earth - the bourgeoisie and capitalism. Technological development was now increasingly incorporated into the means of production. The process of capital accumulation was becoming decisive. Initially, technological development in transportation permitted commercial capitalism to develop. However the new system only became dominant in Western Europe and the United States with the Industrial Revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Beginning in England in the middle of the preceding century and later extending to France, the United States, Belgium and Germany, the Industrial Revolution represents dramatic evidence that history is not a continual, step-by-step process of evolution. It effectively revolutionized the world. Once production became mechanized, labor productivity multiplied. Just as slave labor was replaced by serfdom, we now see the latter replaced by wage labor. The strategic factor of production was no longer land. That sector which was secondary now gains precedence over agricultural and mining in terms of its share in the national income. Aside from this, while primary production was divided up among a large group of landowners, industrial production is concentrated in a relatively small number of capitalist entrepreneurs who control factories and industrial equipment. The strategic factor of production is no longer land, but capital. Political power is transferred from the land-holding aristocracy to the industrial bourgeoisie. We are now in the phase of capitalism. Politically, this stage tends toward guaranteeing a reasonable degree of individual freedom as well as flexibility for the political system, while maintaining political power firmly in the hands of the capitalist class. When he described primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism, Marx was

writing on history. Though we may criticize the high level of abstraction with which his analysis was carried out, his basic insight cannot be disputed.

3. From Capitalism to What?

The division of history into steps is beyond a doubt remarkable. However, up to capitalism, Marx was only analyzing the past. When he began to define the historical stages of communism and socialism, he was no longer examining past history, but rather venturing into the future. This foresight, through partially loyal to his historical method and endowed with an internal logic, was to a large extent also profoundly influenced by the generosity of those who dedicated themselves to creating utopias.

In Critique of the Gotha Program (1875), Marx foresaw that the communist society which would follow capitalism would be effectively divided into two stages. The first would be the socialist or (in the terminology Marx preferred) simply the first phase of communism, that would be initiated by the proletariat's take-over of power, the abolition of private ownership of the means of production and the establishment of dictatorship of the proletariat. The state and the law would remain, since bourgeois values and interests would continue to exist and would need to be controlled. Wages would still be paid according to labor productivity, not only because there would not yet be abundance but also because deep-rooted bourgeois habits would persist. In this phase, equality would prevail, based on the fact that each would receive in accordance with what he or she produced. But this is an unfair equality, according to Marx, because men and women are not equal. Some are stronger, some more able, and others weaker, or with more children to support, so that the final result of equality in wages is, in fact, inequality.

This stage would at some point be replaced by communism, characterized by abundance, by the absence of the state, by liberty, by the full realization of human potential and by remuneration in accordance to the needs of each individual. In the words of Marx:

In the higher phase of communist society, when the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and with it the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; when labor is no longer merely a means of life but has become life's principal need; when the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of cooperative wealth flow more abundantly - only then will it be possible completely to transcend the narrow outlook of bourgeois right, and only then will society be able to inscribe on its banner. From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (1875: 258).

This paragraph is the synthesis of a Marxist utopia. The distinction between manual and intellectual labor and the fundamental basis of class distinctions would disappear. The other essential element, private ownership of the means of production would have already disappeared in the socialist stage. Economic development would proceed so that we would reach a level of abundance. Labor continues to be necessary, but more than a social necessity, it is also an individual necessity, a means par excellence for personal fulfillment. The state and the law would gradually fade in importance until they disappeared, replaced by each citizen's self-discipline. Men and women, whose nature is essentially good, would fully realize their human potential (we see Marx following Rousseau here, as opposed to Hobbes' homo lupus homini). True equality would prevail, defined by the division of the social product in accordance with each member's needs. The withering away of the state would finally guarantee freedom, as it is incompatible with the state. Democracy itself is a form of government in which freedom is limited by the existence of the state, so that when it disappears, freedom will be possible. This will occur as a result of each member's self-discipline, made possible by the prevailing abundance, the disappearance of social classes and the loosening of ties to the egotistic, individualistic habits of past epochs.

One cannot categorically state that Marx was in error his prediction of a communist society. It is an optimistic dream, a utopia, and it is always possible to say that its time has not yet come. But the same cannot be said in relation to socialism. For Marx, socialism would directly follow capitalism. It was from this perspective that the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was carried out. But in not one of the countries where the private ownership of the means of production was done away with has socialism as envisioned by Marx been established.

4. A "Third" Class

Marx failed in his vision of the coming of socialism because he was not entirely true to his own method of historical analysis. He did not take into account that, historically, the dominated class has never become the dominant class in the following mode of production. In other words, the "internal" class struggle of a system has never reached the point of being revolutionary. Slaves did not become masters after feudalism, nor did serfs become entrepreneurs in the capitalist mode of production. Thus it would be strange if the workers directly linked to production in the capitalist mode of production become the dominant group in the immediately following mode. The new dominant group generally arises from the dominated group. But it arises as a group apart, as a "third" group, which manages to differentiate itself from the rest of the dominated class.

These few assume control over the new strategic factor of production which the technological development of the moment determines. In other words, the new class which will dispute power with the ruling class and finally assume it is not the previously dominated class as a whole, but rather a subgroup. Its origins are in the dominated class, but has differentiated itself over time and constituted a group separated from either the dominant or the dominated class. To the extent which this new group assumes control over the new strategic factor of production which new technological advances will determine, this group tends to assume political and economic power, giving rise to a new mode of production and therefore a new stage in history.

That is what happened in the passage from feudalism to capitalism. The bourgeoisie probably originated in the serfs of the feudal estate, who made up the dominated class under feudal rule. However, in the Middle Ages, the bourgeoisie set itself apart from the serfs, creating a differentiated socio-economic group, adopting values, beliefs, customs and patterns of its own, defining its own area within the structure of production and creating an intermediate group between the dominant and the dominated classes. It remained in this way for centuries. Although bourgeoisie was not the dominant class, it was far from being the dominated class. It served the aristocracy at the same time that it strengthened itself politically and economically. Economic interests naturally took precedence over political ones, but both finally became dominant. Without a doubt, a class struggle took place between the emerging bourgeoisie and the decadent aristocracy, but this struggle was not always clear or well-defined. On many occasions, the bourgeoisie actively cooperated with the aristocracy, or with sectors of the same, to the extent that this cooperation served its self-interest. The clearest observable case of this was the great support the absolute monarchs received from the bourgeoisie during the struggles against feudal privileges in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Another characteristic related to the historical process of change in dominant elites, or modification of the relations of production, is that the dominated class is an integral part of the existing mode of production, growing or entering into decline together with its respective elite, whereas the new class that assumes power represents an innovation or break within the system. Thus, in the case of the passage from feudalism to capitalism, the serfs constituted an integral part of the feudal system. Serfs as well as artisans rose and fell with the rise and fall of feudalism itself.

The same phenomenon is occurring today as capitalism tends toward some form of technobureaucratic control. The working class, the urban proletariat that performs manual labor in industry, also tends to be gradually disappearing. The industrial proletariat was a specific creation of industrial

capitalism. The rise of the industrial bourgeoisie to power corresponds to the emergence of the working class, that immediately assumed the role of dominated class, par excellence, excluding the rural working class and peasants from the new system. As capitalism begins to be surpassed by a new system with automation as one of its essential characteristics, the number of unskilled manual laborers in industry is beginning to diminish, in relative and absolute terms, principally in the developed countries, but also in the developing nations.

So we see that in the same way that the serfs and artisans disappeared as the traditional society was replaced by capitalism, we now witness the decline of the working class as capitalism is replaced another economic and social order, that will probably be called capitalism for lack of another name.

Marx's prediction that capitalism would be superseded by socialism was based on the idea of class struggle and the rise to power of the urban proletariat. According to what we have just seen: (a) the dominated class in a given mode of production never becomes the dominant class in the mode of production which follows, that role belonging to an external group, who differentiates itself from the oppressed class to play this revolutionary role; (b) the dominated class within the mode of production rises and falls within this mode, as happened with the artisan class and is now happening with the industrial proletariat; (c) the working class has to some extent become a beneficiary of the capitalist mode of production and has reached a stage of more political accommodation.

In the countries which maintain private ownership of the means of production as well as in those which have abolished it, what we see throughout the world today is that political and economic power are being concentrated in a new socio-economic group - the technobureaucrats who derive their power from control of the new strategic factor of production: technological and managerial capability. In state societies technobureaucrats derive their power only from the state; in capitalist societies, they derive their power from the state and from large private organizations and divide their power with capitalists, who conserve their dominant role.

It does not follow from this analysis, however, that statism will eventually follow capitalism. The technobureaucratic is increasingly powerful, but this does not mean that statism will replace capitalism. In the last years what we have seen was just the contrary: the withdraw of statism and finally, in the second part of the 1980s, a profound crisis in the statist countries.

In the class struggle between the capitalists and the workers, technobureaucrats tend to associate themselves to the capitalists rather than to the workers. As the bourgeoisie was for centuries an ally of the landlords, the salaried middle class maintains a permanently dialectical relation of conflict and

cooperation with the bourgeoisie. In a certain sense, in technobureaucratic capitalism, they are part of same group, the "business class", that is composed of capitalists and professional managers.

However, we should not forget that in the last century and a half, the most generous and morally legitimate aspirations of a great number of youth, intellectuals, and workers have been directly devoted to the cause of socialism. As we will see further in this book, the idea of socialism is far from dead. It permeates the protest movements against the established order; in one way or another, the "counterculture" and the student revolution of the 1960s' were socialist. However, this socialism is quite different from that envisioned by Marx, and absolutely opposed to that which is or was called socialism in the Soviet Union.