

## Marxism and Mr. Bettelheim

*Sunil Sen*

*The writings of Charles Bettelheim have been highly evaluated amongst some strands of the democratic movement in India not least because they appear to offer an explanation of the roots of capitalist restoration in the USSR. The child is the father of the man it is said so let us look at the early history of Bettelheim as contained in the major study of Claude Varlet entitled 'Critique de Bettelheim I, La Révolution d'octobre et les luttes de classes en USSR' (Paris, 1978). The entire book devastatingly analyses the period from 1934 right through to the publication of the first volume of the study of class struggles in the USSR and the writings on the Chinese cultural revolution and its aftermath. In his interviews and writings of 1974 and 1975 Bettelheim recalled his ideological journey, saying that the October revolution had opened a new era in the history of humanity and that the Soviet Union furnished a model of socialist construction and that while researching in the USSR during the period of the trials of Zinoviev and Kamenev he had posed some questions on the foundations of Stalinist politics. Varlet points out that Bettelheim gives the impression of having the requisite fidelity to Marxism-Leninism, attachment to the USSR, a critical spirit and scientific competence but that this self-assessment is revealing not for what it says but for what it dissimulates. The archaeological excavation of Bettelheim's history becomes necessary in order to understand his conceptions after 1968. Bettelheim's post-war publication on Soviet planning ('La Planification soviétique', Paris, 1946) gives us a telling picture of the author's views. In his analysis of the period of the New Economic Policy Bettelheim argues that it was characterised externally by the stabilisation of the relations of Soviet Russia with the capitalist states and internally the country experienced the party and state functionaries freeing themselves from the dictatorship of the masses and establishing themselves as a bureaucratic caste. This evolution was reflected in the struggles between the rightists (Bukharin, Rykov), the centre (Stalin) and the left of the party (Trotsky, then Zinoviev and Kamenev) which represented a certain anti-bureaucratic trend which was ultimately defeated. The socialist offensive in planning, industry and agriculture in 1929 was characterised by Bettelheim as the solution born of despair. State power, he argued, in the USSR was exercised by bureaucrats and technicians. The motives which pushed the working class to realise the Plan were identical to those of the countries of monopoly capital. Bettelheim evidently was unable to see beyond the theoretical frame of Leon Trotsky. After the second world war in the period 1945-51 Bettelheim participated in the editorial committee (which also included, not accidentally, two American economists, P. Baran and P.M. Sweezy) of the broad trotskyist journal Revue Internationale. Here, too, in his contributions Bettelheim argued that the Soviet state was headed by a privileged bureaucratic stratum composed of organisers and technicians. The general trend of Bettelheim's thinking before he re-joined the Communist Party of France is clear. Varlet in his tour de force continues his encyclopaedic exposé of Bettelheim in the years that he supported the Twentieth Congress of the CPSU, adopted the economic views of Paul Baran, absorbed the philosophical effusions of the revisionist Althusser, and applauded the Khrushchev – Liberman reforms. It is evident that Bettelheim brought a lot of revisionist- trotskyite baggage with him when he embarked upon his 'analysis' of the struggles in the USSR.*

**V.S.**

After the death of Karl Marx, Engels wrote in the Preface to the German Edition of the *Communist Manifesto* of 1883:

'The basic thought running through the Manifesto - that economic production and the structure of society of every historical epoch necessarily arising therefrom constitute the foundation for the political and intellectual history of that epoch; that consequently (ever since the dissolution of the primeval communal ownership of land) all history has been a history of class struggles, of struggles between exploited and exploiting, between dominated and dominating classes at various stages of social development; that this struggle, however, has now reached a stage where the exploited and oppressed class (the proletariat) can no longer emancipate itself from the class which exploits and oppresses it (the bourgeoisie), without at the same time for ever freeing the whole of society from exploitation, oppression and class struggles - this basic thought belongs solely and exclusively to Marx.'

This basic thought has at various times come under open or veiled attack not only from its bourgeois detractors but also from within the communist movement. Bernstein, one of the leading lights of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, was one of the first to attack the concept. During Engels' time many a question was raised and the sum and substance of the answer was to stress that 'the whole vast process goes on in the form of interaction - though of very unequal forces, the economic movement being by far the strongest, the primary and most decisive and that in this context everything is relative and nothing absolute ---' (Engels to Schmidt, 27 October, 1890 in Marx and Engels, 'Selected Correspondence', Moscow, 1975, p. 402).

Marxism, especially its materialist conception of history has been attacked under the name of economic materialism, reductionism, determinism etc. The challenge in our time comes in a very subtle form from within the camp. It has been bandied about by a host of academics belonging to what can be broadly called the Monthly Review School and the Revolutionary Internationalist Movement. Here is a specimen, which we have picked up from a very influential tract of our time - Class struggles in the USSR by Charles Bettelheim:

'It should be recalled that the term 'economism' was used by Lenin to characterize critically a conception of Marxism which sought to reduce to a mere "economic theory" by means of which all social changes could be interpreted. Such a conception can assume a variety of forms ...

'Because economism defines the development of the productive forces as the driving force of history, one of its chief effects is to depict the political struggle between classes as the direct and the immediate result of economic contradictions.' (Charles Bettelheim, 'Class struggles in the USSR, First Period 1917-23,' New York, 1978, pp. 33-34)

The 'economism' that Lenin fought against had nothing to do with the understanding of the economic factor in the materialist conception of history. Actually, Bernstein who provided ammunition to the 'economists' and from whom they derived theoretical sustenance vehemently criticized 'economic materialism' or the importance given to the 'economic factor' by Marxists and alleged that Marxism considered the economy to be the *sole* determining factor.

What then was 'economism' as fought out by Lenin? What did the 'economists' say? They said -

'— let the workers carry on the economic struggle (*it would be more correct to say the trade-unionist struggle, because the latter also embraces specifically working-class politics*) and let the Marxist intelligentsia merge with the liberals for the political 'struggle'. (Emphasis added; V. I. Lenin, 'What is to be done?' in 'Collected Works', Vol. 5, Moscow, 1973, 363-64).

The economists talked about 'lending the economic struggle itself a political character' which served 'as a screen to conceal what is in fact the traditional striving to degrade Social-Democratic politics to the level of trade-union politics!' and it 'means nothing more than the struggle for economic reforms.' (*ibid*, p. 76).

Bettelheim uses this term (economism) in order to camouflage his special (but not so new) conception of 'historical materialism', as one directed against *economism*. He actually uses this pejorative term to denigrate and distort the classical Marxist conception of historical materialism. That the economic basis is the *ultimate* determining factor is disregarded in the name of economism. Economism is said to consider the development of productive forces as the driving force of history. For sure, though it may seem amazing to many, especially those who hold the Monthly Review School and Charles Bettelheim in high esteem, Bettelheim finds Marx sufficiently guilty of such an economistic view.

'It is true that not all the writings of Marx and Engels show with the same rigour the connection between the processes of social reproduction and of social transformation (e.g., certain formulations in the 1859 preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* are not free from ambiguity) This is why we need to consider the writings of Marx and Engels, and Marxism as it has existed historically, as a contradictory combination of formulations and analyses which are revolutionary (in their content and in the conclusions that can be drawn from them) and others which are less rigorous... (Charles Bettelheim, 'Class struggles in the USSR, Second period 1923-1930', Hassocks, Sussex, 1978, p. 569 footnote).

‘The formulations of *Dialectical and Historical Materialism*<sup>(1)</sup> summarized and discussed in the foregoing pages undoubtedly bear some relationship to certain writings by Marx. This gives them a sort of ‘Marxist authenticity’, the narrow limits of which need to be recognized ...

‘Only gradually do formulations consistently expressing materialist and revolutionary positions become dominant in Marx’s writings ... This is what we see, for instance, in the case of the 1859 preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. This preface presents a dialectic of contradiction between productive forces and production relations which leaves the reader to assume the existence of a ‘development’ of the productive forces that is autonomous, so to speak, with its movement partly unexplained.

‘In volume I of *Capital*, however, some formulations very close to those of 1846 are still present. certain ones even sometimes accentuate the importance attributed to technology. Thus, Marx writes: ‘Technology reveals the active relation of man to nature, the direct process of the production of his life, and thereby it also lays bare the process of the production of the social relations of his life, and of the mental conceptions that flow from these relations.

‘...I shall confine myself to two examples, taken from the writings of 1865 and concerned with the development of *capitalist relations*. Dealing with this question, Marx shows that capitalist relations do not result from a ‘technological change’ but from class struggle in this case, bourgeois class struggle. This change corresponds to what Marx calls ‘the formal subsumption of labour under capital,’ which involves constraint to perform surplus-labour. Marx points out that when *capital begins to subordinate wage labour and in this way develops new social relations*, it does so on the basis of the existing technology. As he says, ‘*technologically speaking* [Marx’s emphasis - C.B.] the labour-process goes on as before’; what is new is ‘that it is now subordinated to capital.’<sup>(2)</sup>

‘It is precisely on the basis of these new (or modified) relations that *new productive forces develop*, namely, those that correspond to the development of machine production. Marx writes : ‘On the basis of that change..., specific changes in the mode of production are introduced which create new forces of production, and these in turn influence the mode of production so that new real conditions come into being.

‘Here we see a real dialectical movement, in which *what changes first* is not the ‘productive forces’, or the ‘instruments of production’, but *social relations* and this as the result of class struggle, of bourgeois class struggle. We are therefore very far away from the affirmation made in *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* that changes in production ‘*always begin*’ with changes and development of the productive forces, and in the first place, with changes and development of the *instruments of production.*’ (*ibid.*, pp. 513, 515 and 516. Emphases in original).

Incidentally, Charles Bettelheim’s charlatanism is totally exposed here. Not only that he has to ‘confine himself’ to ‘just two examples’ (as if he can give more) from the Appendix to *Capital* Vol. I (removed by Marx himself in subsequent editions), the main body of which (the book) refutes his contention but even then this fare is *spurious*. The full paragraph from which Bettelheim quotes (see the highlighted part above) reads (quite to the contrary!) like this -

‘*For capitalist relations to establish themselves at all presupposes that a certain historical level of social production has been attained. Even within the framework of an earlier mode of production certain needs and certain means of communication and production must have developed which go beyond the old relations of production and coerce them into the capitalist mould.* But for the time being they need to be developed only to the point that permits the formal subsumption of labour under capital. On the basis of that change, however, specific changes in the mode of production are introduced which create new forces of production and these in turn influence the mode of production so that new real conditions come into being. Thus a complete economic revolution is brought about. On the one hand it creates the real conditions for the domination of labour by capital, perfecting the process and providing it with the appropriate framework.’ (Appendix to K. Marx, ‘*Capital*’, vol. 1, Harmondsworth, 1976, pp.1064 - 1065. Emphasis added).

We find that even here, where, Bettelheim allegedly finds succour for his bogus theory, Marx gives ‘primacy’ to the development of productive forces. He writes that the formal subsumption of the labour process to capital requires a certain development of productive forces; even then, he considers these relations inadequate for the specifically capitalist mode of production. Marx considers productive forces to be the most mobile element of production. In the overall historical development of society, productive forces have played the main determining role. This view according to Bettelheim does not accord the pride of place to the class struggle. So we need to understand this aspect, something which also underlies the object of our study, the general principles laid down in the *Manifesto*. Let us see how Marx relates classes and class struggles to development in production:

‘As to myself no credit is due to me for discovering either the existence of classes in modern society or the struggle between them... What I did that was new was to demonstrate: 1) that the *existence of classes* is merely linked to *particular historical phases in the development of production*, 2) that class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*, 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes* and to a *classless society*’. (Marx to Weydemeyer, March 5, 1852; Marx and Engels, ‘Selected Correspondence’, Moscow, 1975, p. 64. emphases in original).

Here it is important to note that Marx links the existence of classes to stages of development of production. It is this, which Marx considers to be his own contribution. This indeed was an epoch-making contribution, as we shall see. This view which Bettelheim finds to be economistic is definitely linked to class struggle, revolutionary changes and ‘production relations’.

In his division of the writings of Marx and Engels into two parts - one revolutionary and the other ‘not so rigorous’ (read economistic) Bettelheim describes the former in these words:

‘— Marx ascribes the movement of history, and so, also, the development of the productive forces and even of ‘technology’ to changing of social relations and struggles between classes. These formulations go much further than those quoted already. They are at the heart of revolutionary Marx.’ (*op. cit.*, p.516)

He dubs the view that links the existence classes to stages of development of production and the ensuing class struggle as the *immediate* driving force of history as mechanical materialism (note our emphasis on *immediate*). Bettelheim holds that - ‘Because economism defines the development of the productive forces as the driving-force of history, one of its chief effects is to depict the political struggle between classes as the direct and immediate result of economic contradictions.’ The classical Marxist position is this - ‘In modern history at least it is, therefore, proved that all political struggles are class struggles, and all struggles by classes for emancipation, despite their necessarily political form -for every class struggle is a political struggle - turn ultimately on the question of *economic* emancipation.’ (Engels, ‘Ludwig Feuerbach and the end of classical German philosophy’ in K. Marx and F. Engels, ‘Collected Works’, Moscow, 1990, p. 391). It may be noted here that when Bernstein attacked Marxism he held that Marx’s materialist conception of history attributed every event to economic causes only. Similar views are echoed by Bettelheim in his attack on the Soviet experience (led by Stalin). However, this fig leaf is removed once he attacks Marx’s formulations as economistic and contraposes the development of the productive forces with class struggle. To clear up the matter we will quote from Marx’s famous Preface to his work *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

‘My inquiry led me to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term ‘civil society’; that the anatomy of this civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy... The general conclusion at which I arrived and which, once reached, become the guiding principle of my studies can be summarized as follows. In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter, into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of’ social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that

determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or - this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms - with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure.' (Karl Marx, 'A contribution to the critique of Political Economy', Moscow, 1970, pp. 20-21)

There is no ambiguity involved here as Bettelheim claims. He finds that - 'This preface presents a dialectic of contradiction between productive forces and production relations which leaves the reader to assume the existence of a 'development' of the productive forces that is autonomous, so to speak, with its movement partly unexplained. it nevertheless remains true that, in this work, the transformation is not related *directly* to the 'development of the productive forces,' but to the contradictions which this development entails, and to the *ideological forms* in which 'men become conscious' of the contradictions and fight out their conflicts.' (*op. cit.*, p.515).

The alleged ambiguity is due to Bettelheim's r-r-revolutionary position which gives primacy to production relations and changes in production relations as opposed to what he calls a 'mechanical materialist' viewpoint. Actually through his 'relations of production first' fetish (see quote above) he discards the basic dialectical materialist understanding which led Marx to his materialist conception of history. The question which Marx asked was why certain social relations existed at a certain age and not other ones. Why do men establish certain types of social relations among themselves and not other ones? Are these social relations (relations of production) established by men in accordance with their sweet will? What does Charles Bettelheim's 'production relations first' fetish signify then? It signifies chance, arbitrariness and an appeal to things like 'elevated human nature of selflessness, collectivism' etc. In short, it grounds political economy and the materialist conception of history into the quicksand of subjectivism. Marx considers the course of history to be governed by inner general laws. Each generation finds itself in definite given circumstances handed down from its predecessor. It is bequeathed a sum of productive forces and historically created relations of individuals to each other. Men enter into definite relations with nature and among themselves *independent of their will*. They also modify their circumstances but at the same time these conditions prescribe the material limits of life for each generation and fashions it. This means that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.

This view of the world should be read in conjunction with the *Theses on Feuerbach* where Marx writes that the 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity can be conceived and rationally understood as revolutionising practice'. In volume I of *Capital* Marx makes the profound remark - 'By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature'. The manner in which man acts upon the external world depends on the forces at his disposal including skills, the tools, the means of production, in short, productive forces. In keeping with the nature of these productive forces men establish certain relations, which we call after Marx- production relations. This is starkly put by Marx in these words:

'In production, men not only act on nature but also on one another. They produce only by cooperating in a certain way and mutually exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations with one another and only within these social connections and relations does their action on nature, does production, take place.

'These social relations into which the producers enter with one another, the conditions under which they exchange their activities and participate in the whole act of production, will naturally vary according to the character of the means of production, with the invention of a new instrument of warfare, fire-arms, the whole internal organisation of the army necessarily changed; the relationships within which individuals can constitute an army and act as an army were transformed and the relations of different armies to one another also changed.

'Thus the social relations within which individuals produce, *the social relations of production, change, are transformed, with the change and development of the material means of production, the productive forces. The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and, specifically, a*

society *at a definite stage of historical development*, a society with a peculiar, distinctive character. Ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois society are such totalities of production relations, each of which at the same time denotes a special stage of development in the history of mankind.' ('Wage Labour and Capital', in K. Marx, F. Engels, 'Collected Works', Vol. 9, Moscow, 1977, p. 212. Emphases in the original).

This is how Marx put historical materialism on a firm basis, on something, which lies outside man, 'human nature' and so on - *in his relations with the external world*. Only this view can answer the question why men are bound by such and such relations. There is nothing mechanistic about it. Without such an understanding, one cannot understand the 'dialectics' of productive forces and production relations, which the Bettelheims prate about. Such 'dialectics' without reference to the objective world can only result in sophistry. If we cannot find out the determining factor in history, we can only fall into the pit of subjectivism, without referring to this contradiction in terms of it being 'independent of man's will'. We can only talk of interaction of the various factors whether of the base or the superstructure and such interaction can hardly explain anything apart from stating the fact of the existence of these factors. However, it cannot explain the origin of these factors, cannot put them on a solid materialist basis. As Marx says classes and class struggles were known to bourgeois historians (especially bourgeois historians of the Restoration period - Thierry, Guizot, Mignet and Thiers) but they did not come any nearer to the materialist conception of history. Marx writes that the class struggle which Bettelheim is supposedly so enamoured of was not his discovery proper but it was he who linked the existence of classes to particular phases of production. It was only his materialist conception of history that made it possible to envision the dictatorship of the proletariat as the logical outcome of the class struggle and the consequent abolition of classes. Marx and Engels called the class struggle the *immediate* driving power of history and the *ultimate* causes of the movement of history they saw in the changes in the productive forces. Dialectics views anything in its coming into being, growth and destruction. The development of classes too has been traced by Marx and Engels to the development in the productive forces in history. Anthropology has supplied us with rich material to corroborate this view of the coming into being of class society. It is, for example, well known that societies, which are at a lower level of development, did not take prisoners of war; they either killed them or adopted them. Only with a certain growth of productive forces and the advent of slavery were the conquered taken as slaves. This could take place only with a certain amount of growth in production, which made it possible to maintain a class of people who did not work. Let us listen to Engels in 1884 -

'According to the materialist conception, the determining factor in history is, in the last resort, the production and reproduction of immediate life. But this itself, again, is of a twofold character. On the one hand, the production of the means of subsistence, of food, clothing and shelter and the implements required for this; on the other hand, the production of human beings themselves, the propagation of the species. The social institutions under which men of a definite historical epoch and a definite country live are determined by both kinds of production: by the stage of development of labour on the one hand, and of the family, on the other. The less labour is developed and the more limited the volume its products, and, therefore, the wealth of society, the more predominately the social order appears to be dominated by ties of kinship. However, within this structure of society based on ties of kinship the productivity of labour develops more and more; and with it, private property and exchange, differences in wealth, the possibility of utilising the labour power of others, and thereby the basis of class antagonisms : new social elements, which strive in the course of generations to adapt the old structure of society to the new conditions, until finally, incompatibility of the two leads to a complete transformation. The old society, based on ties of kinship, bursts asunder with the collision of the newly developed social classes; in its place a new society appears, constituted in a state, the lower units of which are no longer groups based on ties of kinship but territorial groups, a society in which the family system is entirely dominated by the property system, and in which the class antagonisms and class struggle, which make up the content of all hitherto *written* history now freely unfold. ('The Origin of the Family, Private property and the State', Preface to the First Edition in K. Marx, F. Engels, 'Collected Works', Moscow, 1990, p. 132).

The origin of classes is itself related to the growth in productive forces and so also the condition for the abolition of classes. Marxism, which Lenin characterized as being at the same time scientific and revolutionary is not built upon the thesis of 'elevated human nature' and so on but contains a scientific rigour which gives it an unshakable foundation and it is this that has been lending us firm conviction all these 150 years. Its scientific

basis has ensured that it endures as the guiding thought of the oppressed and the exploited. Marx in his appraisal of Ricardo lays bare his scientific rigour:

‘Ricardo, rightly for his time, regards the capitalist mode of production as the most advantageous for production in general, as the most advantageous for the creation of wealth. He wants *production for the sake of production* and this with *good reason*. To assert, as sentimental opponents of Ricardo’s did, that production as such is not the object, is to forget that production for its own sake means nothing but the development of human productive forces, in other words the *development of the richness of human nature as an end in itself*. To oppose the welfare of the individual to this end as Sismondi does, is to assert that the development of the species must be arrested in order to safeguard the welfare of the individual, so that, for instance, no war may be waged in which at all events some individuals perish. (Sismondi is only right as against the economists who *conceal* or deny this contradiction.) Apart from the barrenness of such edifying reflections, they reveal a failure to understand the fact that, although at first the development of the capacities of the *human* species takes place at the cost of the majority of human individuals and even classes, in the end it breaks through this contradiction and coincides with the development of the individual; the higher development of individuality is thus only achieved by a historical process during which individuals are sacrificed, for the interests of the species in the human kingdom, as in the animal and plant kingdoms, always assert themselves at the cost of the interests of individuals, because these interests of the species coincide only with the *interests of certain individuals*, and it is this coincidence which constitutes the strength of these privileged individuals’. (Karl Marx, ‘theories of surplus-Value’, Part II, Moscow, 1978, pp. 117-118. Emphases in the original).

It is scientific investigation again that is at the core of Marx’s socialism and not sentimentalism or concerns about ‘human nature’ and so on. Marx puts the historical mission and the historical nature of capitalism in these words -

‘The *real barrier* of capitalist production is *capital itself*. It is that capital and its self-expansion appear as the starting and the closing point, the motive and the purpose of production; that production is only production for *capital* and not vice versa, the means of production are not mere means for a constant expansion of the living process of the *society* of producers. The limits within which the preservation and self-expansion of the value of capital resting on the expropriation and pauperisation of the great mass of producers can alone move - these limits come continually into conflict with the methods of production employed by capital for its purposes, which drive towards unlimited extension of production, towards production as an end in itself towards unconditional development of the social productivity of labour. The means - unconditional development of the productive forces of society - comes continually into conflict with the limited purpose, the self-expansion of the existing capital. The capitalist mode of production is, for this reason, a historical means of developing the material forces of production and creating an appropriate world market and is at the same time, a continual conflict between this its historical task and its own corresponding relation of social production’. (Karl Marx, ‘Capital’, Vol. III, Moscow, 1986, p. 250. Emphases in the original)

This gives a scientific basis for socialism. We here have an idea of the ‘dialectic’ of productive forces and production relations. The contradiction between productive forces and production relations is not a formula but a movement, a historical movement. It has got to do with the coming into being of human society, with its struggle for existence, its appropriation of nature with the help of tools (instruments of production) and labour. The stages of development of productive forces are the factor, which fashions the production relations of mankind. This does not mean that relations of production play no role in the development of the productive forces. Relations of production spur the development of productive forces up to a certain point after which they start behaving like a drag on their further development necessitating a change in these relations. This calls forth an era of social revolution. If one has read *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* one can see how Engels relates the contradictions in the mode of production with the class struggle in society and the ensuing revolutionary transformation, the socialist revolution.

‘This contradiction (between socialised production and private appropriation -author), which gives to the new mode of production its capitalistic character, *contains the germ of the whole of the social antagonisms of today*’.

*'The contradiction between socialised production and capitalistic appropriation manifested itself as the antagonism of proletariat and bourgeoisie.'*

'— unheard of development of productive forces, excess of supply over demand, overproduction, glutting of the markets, crises every ten years,<sup>(3)</sup> the vicious circle: excess here, of means of production and products - excess there, of labourers, without employment and without means of existence. But these two levers of production and of social well-being are unable to work together, because the capitalist form of production prevents the productive forces from working and the products from circulating, unless they are first turned into capital - which their superabundance prevents. The contradiction has grown into an absurdity. *The mode of production rises in rebellion against the form of exchange.* The bourgeoisie are convicted of in capacity further to manage their own social productive forces'. *'Proletarian Revolution - Solution of the contradictions'*. (Karl Marx, F. Engels, 'Collected Works', Vol. 24, Moscow, 1989, pp. 310, 311, 325. Emphases in the original )

He points out that the socialist revolution is a resolution of these contradictions. There is nothing 'voluntaristic' about it. Revolutionary transformations do not come about by themselves, that is obvious. Social revolutions are brought about by men; they are the actors in history. Men act with deliberation, they are all endowed with consciousness, they act with certain intentions, they have certain motives. Should we stop at recognising the ideal driving motives? Should we be content with linking the changes in history to the ideological forms in which 'men become conscious' of the contradictions and fight out their conflicts as Bettelheim and his ilk want us to do? The authors of the *Manifesto* went further in keeping with their dialectical materialist outlook and found out what lay behind these ideal driving forces. Marx's materialism unlike earlier materialism starts with real, active men, not abstract man. It begins with their actual life-process, with the material conditions of their life. Going behind these ideal driving forces Marx and Engels found that. 'it was just as clear that in the struggle between landed property and the bourgeoisie, no less than in the struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, it was a question first and foremost, of economic interests, to the furtherance of which political power was intended to serve merely as a means.' Then again, this conflict was the result of the contradiction between productive forces and production relations represented by opposing classes.

Setting out from real active men historical materialism takes the activities of the masses into account. People make their own history. Individuals act according to different ideas and have different strivings. All these conscious desired ends mostly lead to results and consequences not intended. Here accident reigns on the surface. The end result shows it to be the product of a power, which operates as a whole unconsciously. By examining the totality of such strivings and activities, Marx and Engels could reduce them to the conditions of life and production of the various classes of society. They showed that ultimately these could be traced to the conditions of the material forces of production. The products of mankind have hitherto dominated the producers. Engels remarks :

'Men make their history themselves, but not as yet with a collective will according to a collective plan or even in a clearly defined given society. Their aspirations clash, and for that very reason all such societies are governed by *necessity*, whose complement and manifestation is *accident*. The necessity which here asserts itself through all accident is again ultimately *economic necessity*.' (Marx and Engels, 'Selected Correspondence', Moscow, 1975, p. 442; Letter to W. Borgius, January 25, 1894. Emphases in the original). It is only by the supersession of the capitalist mode of production and the establishment of communism that humanity makes a leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom. Marx writes:

'...In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilised man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of their human nature. But it

nonetheless still remains a realm of necessity. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself *the true realm of freedom, which however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis.*' (Karl Marx, 'Capital', Vol. III, Moscow, 1986, p. 820, Emphases added).

We find that at a certain stage in the communist movement this conception of necessity — that nature and society work according to inner general laws — was misunderstood or neglected. Stalin had to combat this in the field of political economy.<sup>(4)</sup> We find this misconception carried over into Gramsci, who incidentally is much-touted by a section of the 'movement'. In his famous *Prison Notebooks* we find that he holds freedom to be the realm of the subjective, that of the superstructure.<sup>(5)</sup> This conception does not hold on to Marx's strict conception of necessity. For Gramsci the realm of freedom is the realm of the subjective, he talks of it in terms of the free movement of thought unfettered by the contradictions of the material world. He writes: 'In the reign of 'freedom' thought and ideas can no longer be born on the terrain of contradictions and the necessity of struggle.'<sup>(6)</sup> Contrast this with Marx's conception of the realm of freedom which can only blossom forth with the realm of necessity (the appropriation from nature of man's material wants) as its basis [see quote above]. We find this identification of freedom with the subjective or the superstructure being carried over into post-structuralists, post-modernists or so-called neo-Gramscians like Laclau, Mouffe *et al* for whom the 'emancipatory project' is the spread of an 'ideological discourse' of freedom and equality. This disregard of the relation between necessity and freedom can also be found in the many 'discourses' in the communist movement on the interaction between the base and superstructure and the importance given to supposed changes in the superstructure which does not contend with the material conditions of production, what Marx calls the realm of necessity, which remains as the basis. The spectacular successes of the Soviet Union led to a belief in the miraculous powers of the Soviet system among the people who thought that it could 'by-pass' all constraints in the sphere of material production and create its own laws to further the cause of socialism and communism. Stalin argued against such reasoning and showed the difference between the two sets of laws—the laws made by the Soviet state which only had juridical validity and any amount of law-making or measures taken in the realm of superstructure could not contravene the other set of laws - the laws of political economy. He argued that this realm of necessity remains and any measure taken had to keep this in mind and warned against such subjectivism. No society whether communist or socialist could ignore them. Freedom after all was appreciation of necessity. Only by cognizing this necessity and acting accordingly the Soviet state could plan and lead the advance towards the building of a communist society.<sup>(7)</sup> In the name of interaction of superstructure and base, the view that the ultimate deciding factor is the economic basis is put at a discount. It is dubbed as *economism*. The Soviet experience under the leadership of Stalin is criticized on these grounds. The talk of changing the relations of production *first* appears to be very revolutionary but is subjectivist and does not take into account the conditions of material production. Such views gained prominence in the post-Stalin era with the ascendancy of revisionism in the communist camp. The material basis for the triumph of such ideas was fertile indeed with the East having been drawn into the maelstrom of the communist movement and experiencing revolutionary upheavals. In these predominantly peasant societies the ideals of equality, frugality and the remnants of a communal life jelled well with the egalitarianism of such subjectivism. After all there have existed powerful currents of peasant-socialism all over the world whether it be of the Henry George variety in the United States or the Narodniks in Russia or our very own socialists in India for that matter. The petty-bourgeois intelligentsia found such ideas attractive, the communist movement started being overwhelmed by a wave of petty-bourgeois wishful thinking and petty bourgeois socialism. All this no doubt reflected the aspirations of the peasant masses in these countries. These aspirations were to be addressed through development by the non-capitalist path and not some variety of petty-bourgeois socialism which brought about socialist relations of production *first* without regard to the state of development of the productive forces. With the usurpation of the dictatorship of the proletariat in the USSR following the Khrushchevite takeover the possibility of following the non-capitalist path of development envisaged for countries with low level of development of productive forces was arrested. The Soviet Union had been following a policy of giving material aid to countries where the toilers exercised state power so that their gradual and painless introduction into the higher forms of economic life and socialism could be ensured. The non-capitalist path of development for such countries was a prospect to which Marx and Engels had paid attention and which incidentally also finds mention in the preface to the Russian edition of the *Manifesto* written by Engels.<sup>(8)</sup> However, this had to do with the aid of proletarian revolutions so that they could help with the development of the productive forces. The socialist homeland, the Soviet Union was extending

such help then. There was no question of 'by-passing' the development of productive forces for achieving socialism.

It is interesting to note that necessity is disregarded even in the name of freedom. A major critique of the orthodox Marxist view of socialism today is that in industrial society human beings are compelled to arrange their affairs according to the rhythm of material forces of production putting freedom at a discount. There is then an idealization of even the Middle Ages. (The ecological critique also holds similar views). One can see here how the questioning of the premises of the materialist conception of history leads to Bettelheim-like positions. Thus we find in the positions of Otto Ullrich of Germany the view that socialism is a question of relationship of human beings to each other and this must not be connected to an undefinable minimum of technological-organizational development. He, in fact, holds that there is no lower limit of the development of productive forces which makes socialism impossible but there is an upper limit. He suggests a throwback to the Middle Ages; he glorifies the peasant's lifestyle. Here is it a sheer coincidence that the question mark put over the Renaissance, Enlightenment and Rationality by post-modernists should echo that of these 'Marxists'.

The urge for destruction of the productive forces is only a complement to the massive destruction of productive forces being put in place by imperialism whether in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes, economic 'reforms' (the neo-liberal agenda), the preoccupation with the reduction of the fiscal deficit or in the form of wars and pogroms. Even environmental concerns are being used to this end. Imperialism today cannot sustain the growth of productive force and must destroy them in order to survive. It is revealing its moribund nature as never before. To this end, we find imperialism is being served by such theses, even if unwittingly, by helping to focus on the destruction of productive forces instead of production relations. Ironically, the 'production relations *first*' thesis serves this end by denying the role of the growth of productive forces as a basis for socialism or communism.

Marx bases his communism on the growth of productive forces. The following passage gives a good idea of Marx's understanding -

'Real wealth manifests itself rather - and this is revealed by large-scale industry - in the immense disproportion between the labour time employed and its product, and similarly in the qualitative disproportion between labour reduced to a pure abstraction and the power of the production process which it oversees....

'Once this transformation has taken place, it is neither the immediate labour performed by man himself nor the time for which he works, but the appropriation of his own general productive power, his comprehension of Nature and domination of it by virtue of his being a social entity - in a word, the development of the social individual - that appears as the cornerstone of production and wealth. *The theft of alien labour time, which is the basis of present wealth*, appears to be a miserable foundation compared to this newly developed one, the foundation created by large-scale industry itself. As soon as labour in its immediate form has ceased to be the great source of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and therefore exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value. *The surplus labour of the masses* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the *non-labour of a few* has ceased to be the condition for the development of general powers of the human mind. As a result, production based upon exchange value collapses, and the immediate material production process itself is stripped of its form of indigence and antagonism. Free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time in a order to posit surplus labour, but in general the reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, to which then corresponds the artistic, scientific, etc., development of individuals, made possible by the time thus set free and the means produced for all of them.' (K. Marx, F. Engels, 'Collected Works', Vol. 29, Moscow, 1987, pp. 90-91).

'... after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly - only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!' ('Critique of the Gotha Programme' in K. Marx, F. Engels, 'Collected Works', Vol. 24, Moscow, 1989, p. 87).

After all, it is this plenitude which flows from the tremendous growth of productive forces that makes communism possible. To the blasé Westerner gorging upon the loot of the world as he is, such talk of plenitude might not be an attractive proposition. He can only visualise communist man having a surfeit of cars, giving himself up to Big Macs and other junk food and perhaps creating a boom in the 'hospitality' industry.... In short, for him communism based upon plenitude is a hideous picture, which he has created after the monstrous image of the turn of the century imperialist society. And nothing can be farther from the truth. Nowhere in Marxism do we find such a conception. When we inscribe on our communist banner - 'to each according to his needs', those needs are not of the feudal lord, the capitalist or the playboy frolicking in the Riviera. When we talk of 'needs' we think in terms of generations who have been brought up in conditions that lead 'to the all-round development of individuals' ('reared in new free social conditions').

The splurging Westerner or his greedy Oriental counterpart has nothing in common with communist man. It is the socio-economic system after all which shapes the culture and make-up of human beings, Acquisition of wealth is an ideal for this society, under capitalism honour, gratitude and even love begin to command a price. This is very different from say the 'virtues' of chivalry and knight-errantry under feudalism. Lenin also remarked that communism 'presupposes not the present productivity of labour and *not the present* ordinary run of people, who like the seminary students in Pomyalovsky's stories,<sup>(9)</sup> are capable of damaging the stocks of public wealth 'just for fun' and of demanding the impossible.' (V.I. Lenin, 'The State and Revolution', in 'Collected Works', Vol. 25, Moscow, 1964, pp. 469-70).

In its r-r-revolutionary Marxist transmutation the original Marxist idea of abundance based upon development of productive forces is dubbed economistic. Plunder of the oppressed countries and the spoliation of nature has led to the 'affluent society'. People from such over-satiated, waste producing and consuming societies after having too much may hanker after a 'spiritual' life (r-r-revolutionary transformations in superstructure for would-be Marxists). After having eradicated a lot of diseases through prosperity Western society has lifestyle health problems and likewise gives itself up to lifestyle social causes. In its post-modern stance, it finds itself having to fight innumerable oppressions, none of which give the key to changing the world. The fight must go on, it is Sisyphus like labour - the movement is everything, the goal nothing, taking us back to old Bernstein.

With the very material basis of communism challenged, the materialist conception of history is a casualty. With the accent on the superstructure, with such Bernsteinian allegations against Marxism that it interprets the world in terms of the economic factor alone, the ultimate determining role of the economic basis is negated. With no *ultimate* determining factor, it is all 'interaction', hence all relativism. Marxism does contain an element of relativism but it cannot be reduced to relativism. With such views, we land up in the brave new world of post-modernism, where no 'totalistic' perspective reigns but the blooming of a hundred fragmented fights. Hence it is a fight with sabre-rattling at everything which the lever being applied at the economic base - the expropriation of the expropriators and therefore it aims at no revolutionary transformation at all. With such a conception, there can be no strategy of a concerted fight but disparate struggles without coordination of forces and joint action. It all sounds very democratic with each section of oppressed free to go the way it likes. However this can only lead to dissipation of energies and at best mean a certain amount of manoeuvring *within* this system. If we cannot achieve centralisation of forces we cannot make a thorough onslaught on this system.

The very concept of class struggle is declared old Marxism (or is it old-fashioned?). In this brave new world we come across the fight of identities and 'minorities' taking the form of ethnic-cleansing, national chauvinistic wars, tribal wars, religious fundamentalism reminding us of the stark choice before human civilization - *socialism or barbarism*, as Rosa Luxemburg put it. If the tremendous growth of productive forces is not harboured for the cause of socialism, for the vast majority of mankind, they will have to be destroyed under this capitalist-imperialist system. How else would this crisis-ridden system plod on? This barbarism buttresses the imperialist cause of destruction of productive forces. It does not lead to a throwback to the 'idyllic' middle ages as our would-be Marxists wistfully talk of. This destruction is dictated by the logic of the inexorable laws of accumulation of the imperialist system. All over the world, it is perpetuating an irrational economy threatening mankind and nature both. As Engels pointed out man cannot behave like a conqueror towards nature. Humanity is after all a product of nature, which has developed in and along with its environment. Its interchange with the rest of nature remains the basis of its life, the realm of necessity. Man cannot afford to be irrational in its

interchange with nature, that is why Marx talks about socialized man, the associated producers, *rationaly* regulating their interchange with nature. Within this imperialist system, environmental concerns are also giving rise to atavistic theses even within the communist movement. On the other hand environmental concerns are becoming levers in competition and also preparing fresh ground for exploitation of the oppressed nations by such 'market-friendly' mechanisms like trade in 'pollution rights'.

Man's interchange with nature remains the realm of necessity, the basis of all his life. This interchange is mediated by the productive forces at his disposal. They are the means through which man can make his ascent to the 'kingdom of freedom'. Today labour in its immediate form is increasingly ceasing to be the great source of wealth, thanks to the development of productive forces. These productive forces can now presage man's entry into the realm of freedom where human energy is an end in itself and where it becomes possible to achieve the all-round development of the faculties of individuals - artistic, scientific etc. Identification of the growth of productive forces with the relations of production of capital betrays the narrow bourgeois horizon of these would-be Marxists. These social relations perpetuate the division of society into antagonistic classes. The continued indigence of the majority of the population is the precondition of the survival of this economic system. The normal process of surplus extraction of this system, the accumulation process is being grounded. Huge amounts of wealth are being transferred through financial speculation (and through the neo-liberal agenda of restructuring and structural adjustment) leading to greater and greater concentration of wealth in a few hands. At such a time it is the great basic thought of the manifesto which serves as a beacon light reminding us that classes have not existed in the hoary past and only with a certain amount of growth of productive forces did class society come into existence and today with the massive productive forces at the disposal of mankind the development of a few need not take place at the expense of the majority but for the overall development of society so that development of each becomes the prerequisite for the development of all and there is an end to class society.

## Notes

1. Written by Stalin.
2. We may remark here that Marx considers that the development of capitalist relations in their 'adequate form' 'presupposes a definite stage in the evolution of the productive forces of labour'. (Appendix to 'Capital' Vol. 1, Harmondsworth, 1976, p.1035.)
3. As was the case then.
4. 'Marxism regards laws of science - whether they be laws of natural science or laws of political economy - as the reflection of objective processes which take place independently of the will of man . Man may discover these laws, get to know them, study them, reckon with them in his activities and utilize them in the interests of society, but he cannot change or abolish them. Still less can he form or create new laws of science.' J.V. Stalin, *Economic Problems of Socialism in the U.S.S.R.*, Peking, 1976, p. 2.
5. Gramsci writes - ' The term 'catharsis' can be employed to indicate the passage from the purely economic (or egoistic-passional) to the ethico-political moment, that the superior elaboration of the structure into superstructure in the minds of men. This also means the passage from 'objective to subjective' and from 'necessity to freedom'.' (A. Gramsci, 'Prison Notebooks', London, 1973, pp. 366-67) \*Gramsci uses 'the word 'catharsis' to indicate (roughly speaking) the acquisition of revolutionary consciousness —' Editorial comment in the book]
6. *ibid.*, p. 405.
7. Here is Engels on the relation between *freedom and necessity* '— freedom is the: appreciation of necessity. 'Necessity is blind in so far as it is not understood.' Freedom does not consist in any dreamt - of independence from natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends. This holds good in relation both to the laws of external nature and to those which govern the bodily and mental existence of men themselves - two classes of laws which we can separate

from each other at most only in thought but not in reality. Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with knowledge of the subject. Therefore the *freer* a man's judgment is in relation to a definite question, the greater is the *necessity* with which the content of this judgment will be determined; while the uncertainty, founded on ignorance, which seems to make an arbitrary choice among many different and conflicting possible decisions, shows precisely by this that it is not free, that it is controlled by the very object it should itself control. Freedom therefore consists in the control over ourselves and over external nature, a control founded on knowledge of natural necessity.' (F. Engels, 'Anti-Duhring', Moscow, 1977, pp. 140-41).

8. Engels wrote - 'Now the question is: can the Russian *obshchina* (village community) though greatly undermined, yet a form of the primeval common ownership of land, pass directly to the higher form of communist common ownership? Or, on the contrary, must it first pass through the same process of dissolution as constitutes the historical evolution of the West?

'The only answer to that possible today is this: If the Russian Revolution becomes the signal for a proletarian revolution in the West, so that both complement each other, the present Russian common ownership of land may serve as the starting point for a communist development.'

9. Reference is to the pupils of a seminary who won notoriety by their extreme ignorance and barbarous customs. They were portrayed by N.G. Pomyalovsky, a Russian author.

***'Proletarian Path', Calcutta, November 1999, pp. 2-11.***

Click [here](#) to return to the September 2000 index.