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The Problems of Tomorrow: Part III — Some Economic Milestones^{13,14}

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The future forms that the production and distribution of products will take are of the utmost significance concerning our future projections: upon these will be founded the entire nature of the society that replaces the capitalist regime. This question did not suddenly appear yesterday, but its solution has become urgent; and furthermore, the experience of the Russian revolution provides us with useful indications, sometimes confirming, sometimes reversing certain conceptions that were formulated in the past in a completely theoretical way.

To solve these questions in a concrete form, that is to say, to elaborate a *plan* of economic organization for "tomorrow," to indicate the frameworks and institutions to be created for its realization, is a task that goes far beyond the competence not only of the author of this article, but also of a publication like *Les Temps Nouveaux*. This is the work of specialists: workers, technicians of all kinds, directly involved in production; only their professional organizations and their colleagues can discuss, in full knowledge of the facts, the concrete measures to be taken in the present as in the future.

But every socialist, and every group of propagandists, has not only the right, but the duty to establish for themselves and for their comrades an idea toward a general point of view, to reflect on the experience that is unfolding before our eyes, and to draw certain general lines according to which they would like to see the more competent thought of the specialists work. It is considerations of this kind that will be dealt with in the present article.

Of the existing conceptions of the mode of organization of production in socialist societies, *nationalization* is the most accessible and widely accepted. The passage of the means of production to an egalitarian society is conceived in the programs of all the Statist socialist parties as their handing-over to the State, because society is, by their definition, represented by the State. No matter what form it takes,

¹³ See issues 1 and 5.

¹⁴ Ed: Isidine, M. "Les problèmes de demain - III - Quelques jalons d'ordre économique [The Problems of Tomorrow - III - Some Economic Milestones]." *Les Temps nouveaux* [*The New Times*], April 15, 1920.

whether parliamentary, Soviet, or in other forms, it is always this centralized organization that holds political power that is also the master of natural resources, the means of production, and the means of product distribution.

We can clearly see to what degree the State finds itself strengthened by all of this. In addition to political power, it now controls every facet of life. The dependence of each citizen upon it reaches its zenith. The boss-State is a particularly authoritarian boss: and like any boss, it wants to be a complete master of its business and tolerates the interference of workers only when it is absolutely impossible to avoid it. In the economic domain, the State won't even tolerate the idea of being a constitutional monarchy: it will always tend toward autocracy. The concept of Jaurès: that of the gradual democratization, by means of the State, of the economic regime, analogous to the political democratization accomplished in the past, now more than ever appears to be a utopia.¹⁵ In the capitalist regime, the workers and employees of the State are the most dependent of all, and on the opposite pole of the social organization, in the collectivist regime of the Bolsheviks, it is the same: the workers lose little by little both the right of control and their factory Committees and even their great means of struggle: the right to strike. And as a crowning achievement, it is the mobilization of labor, "armies" of workers governed by a militaristic discipline. And this is fatal: no power ever restricts itself if nothing forces it to do so; and when the people in power pursue an idea, when they are convinced that it can only be achieved by coercion, they will show themselves to be even more intractable, more absolute in their right to dispose of the existence of its citizens.

It is generally the need to increase production that justifies the suppression of all individual and collective rights of the workers. This is how the Bolshevik power explains the creation of its compulsory labor armies. However, apart from any question of principle, the mere consideration of just the expenses — both in terms of human forces and in money — that any such massive bureaucracy requires, which is a necessary condition of such a vast extension of the power of the State, shows that this calculation is erroneous. In Russia, bureaucratic administration of factories absorbs most of their income, not to mention the number of workers it takes away from other more useful work. And the desired result is far from being achieved. The boss-State is ill-equipped to fight against this decrease in labor productivity which necessarily follows great catastrophes, such as war, famine, lack of necessities, etc., etc. Additionally, the socialist powers of the Bolsheviks are not able to find other means to fight against this issue other than with measures that have always been known, and against which workers and socialists of all countries have always resisted: piecework wages, the bonus system, the Taylor system, etc...¹⁶ Thus everywhere hourly work is replaced by piecework, the twelve-hour day replaces the eight-hour day, the age of compulsory work is lowered from sixteen to fourteen. And, finally, this mobilization of work (a measure of which a few years ago, no socialist party would have been believed capable of implementing) which reminds us well of the times of serfdom...

If socialists, who certainly do not aim at the degradation of workers' personality and take such measures only as a last resort, are obliged to go so far against all their ideals, it should only be because within the limits of their choices, which has for framework and for a tool exclusively the benefit of the State, no

¹⁵ Ed: Jean Jaurès (1859 – 1914) was a French social democrat and anti-militarist who was known as a significant thinker and orator. He was assassinated in 1914 because his anti-war position was seen as capitulation to the Germans.

¹⁶ Ed: "Scientific management," also known as Taylorism, is the system proposed by the engineer Frederick Winslow Taylor in 1909 in his book, *The Principles of Scientific Management*. This system was meant to bureaucratize the workplace to promote efficiency and to "control alienated labor" (Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, 62).

other way out exists. And yet here is a fact, small in itself, but significant. In the course of the very opinionated struggle of the Soviet government against the disorganization of industry, only one measure was taken which proved to be effective. It is *voluntary work on Saturdays*.

“The Communist Party has made voluntary Saturday work mandatory for its members ... Every Saturday, in various regions of the Soviet Republic, barges and fuel wagons are unloaded, railroads repaired, wheat, fuel, and other goods for the population and the war front are loaded, wagons and locomotives repaired, etc. Gradually the great mass of workers and peasants began to join the ‘Saturday workers,’ to help the Soviet power, to contribute with their voluntary work to fight the cold, hunger and general economic disorganization.”¹⁷ From other sources we learn that the productivity of voluntary work far exceeds that of paid factory work. There is no need to say how instructive this example is. In the midst of all the measures by which workers were sometimes attracted by high wages, according to the traditional principle of the capitalist regime, and sometimes subjected to military discipline, only one has proved effective: it is the call to work — free and conscious work by people who know that they are doing something useful. This is a striking example in support of the truth that the most “utopian” solutions are at the same time the most practical, and that if we want to obtain “realizations” today, the surest way is still to start from the final goal.

But these considerations proceed from a mindset foreign to the idea of the State and obligatory work in its service.

Here is another formula, at first sight more seductive. It is the transfer of businesses into the hands of the workers or of their corresponding professional organizations. This is the system which, in France, is expressed by the formula “the mines to the miners.” During the first year of the Russian revolution, even before the Bolsheviks came to power, there were a number of such examples of the workers taking over their factories. This was easy for them (the workers), because the bosses, during that time, wanted nothing better than to abandon their businesses. Later, the Bolsheviks introduced “workers’ control” in all factories; but this control was only momentary and had no practical effect: where the workers were weak and poorly organized, it remained an unrespected moot point; and where the workers were aware of their rights, they said to themselves — quite logically — that if they already had control of the factories, they had no further need to leave them to their former owners. And so they took it over, declaring it the property of those who work there. But it was always the property of a group of people who merely replaced the original bourgeois owner. This could only result in a production cooperative in the best of circumstances. The collective owners were concerned — like the previous ones — solely with their own interests; like the others, they competed against one another in order to attract contracts from the State, etc. Egoism and the thirst for gain, to be the characteristic of any of these groups, new or old, were no less strong.

Another consideration, a practical one, makes it impossible to extend such a system to the entirety of society. There are businesses which receive large profits: those which produce widely spread goods, or are in the business of transporting said goods; the workers who are employed in them and who become their owners are, in this context, privileged. But there are many sectors of the economy which give no profit at

¹⁷ Official organ of the Bolshevik Government *Ekonomicheskaia Jizna* (Vie économique), no. 213 (cited in *Pour la Russie*, no. 10, article by Kerensky).

all, requiring instead continuous expenditures: schools, hospitals, road maintenance, street cleaning, etc., etc. What will be the yields of those who are employed in these fields of work? How will they be able to live if these businesses become the source of their livelihood? With what means will they be able to operate them and who will pay their wages? Obviously, the principle of cooperative ownership must be modified as far as they are concerned. We can imagine, it is true that it will be the consumers who will pay; but this would be a step backwards instead of being considered a progress, because one of the best results of economic evolution is the free access to certain historical conquests of civilization: hospitals, schools, bridges, roads, water pipes, water wells, among others. To ask people to pay for them would be to add some new privileges to those that are already well possessed, and to take away the means of meeting the most essential needs from everyone else.

All these considerations — and many others — make such a system undesirable. In the current context — to which we are always obliged to refer to as if it were the only socialist experience that has ever been created so far — the disadvantages of this system, introduced at the beginning of the Bolshevik period, have led the Soviet government to adopt, as the only possible remedy, nationalization.

We should have, it is true, explored for a third solution: a system that could give workers direct control of their economic lives, without the inconveniences of cooperative property. The Bolsheviks, however, were too imbued with social democratic and statist ideas which suggested to them only the well-known system of nationalization. And it is there that they ended their revolution.

Let us try then, for our part, to find this third way out: a system which would give the workers the management of economic life, but without the disadvantages of corporate ownership. And, first of all, let's go back to our fundamental principles: our communism, true communism, and not that already outdated communism of 1848 that the Bolsheviks have recently rediscovered and adopted as the name of their party to replace the other name, too dishonored by compromises, of "social democrats."¹⁸ Let us try then, in the light of these principles, to orient ourselves a little in the questions that arise.

If we recognize neither nationalization in the hands of the State, nor the formula "the mines to the miners," what alternate forms can the transfer of the means of production to the hands of workers' organizations (unions, summits, factory committees, or such others) take?

First of all, the means of production cannot become the *property* of these organizations: they must only have the *functional use* of them. The wind or the water that turns the wings or the wheels of a mill are not the property of anyone; they are simply harnessed for the purposes of production. In the same vein, the earth should not be the property of anyone; one who cultivates it *uses it*, but it belongs to the whole community — that is, to no one in particular. Likewise, the instruments of labor made by the hands of workers: they are a collective wealth, a common property, *used* by those who need to use them at any given moment for any given task. This being accepted, how can we then imagine: first, the future organization of production, and then that of distribution?

¹⁸ Ed: Goldsmith alludes to the fact that the Bolsheviks, once a part of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, rebranded themselves as the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1918.

It is obvious that only the whole of the professional organizations concerning any branch of production can plan their production; these professional organizations will include both the workers themselves and the more learned specialists — engineers, chemists, etc. Each branch of production is closely linked, on the one hand, with those who supply it with raw materials, and on the other hand, with the organizations or the public who consume its products. And since in these types of relationships the most critical role is the understanding of all needs and possibilities, there must be groups or Committees that will be able to concentrate, compile, and manage all the necessary statistical information. Their role must be strictly limited to that of suppliers of statistical input; the subsequent use of this material would no longer be their concern in the future. They would not be able to issue any decree; those decisions belong exclusively to the larger professional associations. The opinions of these statistical Committees would be of no more coercive a nature than the indications given by an architect, the advice of a hygienist, or that of a pedagogue, etc.

As for the various branches of production, their modes of organization can vary greatly according to the technical particularities of each association: some can accept complete autonomy of their constituent groups, while others can exact perfectly coordinated action. All that is to be desired is that there should be, in each specialty, not just one central organization that governs *everything*, but a large number of *specialized* organizations, each with well-defined tasks. We cannot, of course, foresee the various ways in which this style of organizing work may be envisioned in future contexts. However, adapting it to the needs of the moment may not be an excessively difficult task.

But there are much thornier questions which require continuous innovation because nothing like this has ever been attempted before. Who will be the *owner* of these means of production, which the professional organizations will manage, and of the objects produced — that is to say, of all collective wealth? If not the State, if not the corporations, then who? What does the sentence: “The means of production belong to the community” *concretely* represent? Who will represent these communities? Who and by what right will they dispose of the products? To whom will the profits of these sales be given? Who will pay the wages?

It is in these questions that it is necessary to fully develop our communist idea, our great principle “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs,” and to draw all its subsequent consequences.

Who will dispose of the products of these works? These products must constitute a common wealth available to each person for his or her own consumption, either if they are objects of immediate consumption, or if they belong to the professional organizations that use these products (if they are raw materials or instruments of work). Individuals or organizations can draw upon these stocks to the extent of their needs and, in the case of insufficient quantities, after reaching a fair agreement with other interested consumers or organizations. No one *actually* owns these products other than the workers themselves who will be responsible for fulfilling any orders.

In the same way, the question arises: who will profit from the sales? There is no issue here, because there is actually no sale, because the products are not commodities, but simply objects of consumption, equally accessible to all. Communism does not recognize the distinction between objects of consumption —*private* property and the means of production — and *collective* property. It does not even recognize a difference in configuration between them; coal, for example, where would it be classified? It is an indispensable element of production, and yet it is also one of the most necessary objects of individual consumption. The tendency of communism is to make all objects free. Everyone will agree that housing, food, necessary clothing, heating, etc., must be made available to everyone in the same way as medical aid or street lighting, which even today's capitalist society provides. Every human being has the right to these basic necessities by the mere fact of their existence, and no one has the right to deprive them. The individual's share of this social consumption can be determined by many factors, individual and/or social: first of all, by the needs of each person, and for everything that is in excess of that: alas!

In today's Europe, instead of an abundance of products, there is rather a scarcity, and this will force us to be better prepared for future needs. A necessary minimum (calculated as much as possible on some kind of average consumption), will be to establish and to organize fair distribution of needs based on common agreement. Rations can and should be different for different categories of people. To establish these categories, it is again on the differences of needs that there must be discretion; there will be taken into account: the age, the state of health, their ability to defend themselves, etc... Many considerations will have to be taken into account, moreover and especially in the distribution of the products: the needs of the community, the need to make reserves for the future and to keep a certain quantity of products for any potential exchanges with other communities, etc., etc. There is only one factor that we refuse to introduce into these calculations: it is the sum of work spent by each individual.

Here we can foresee the protests coming. The spectacle of *today's* society, where those who produce the least consume the most, revolts our sense of justice and makes us declare immediately: to each person the fruits of their labor and to each proportionally according to the labor provided.

But, in spite of this seemingly natural progression of thinking, we think that it is not on this principle — however legitimate it may seem in contrast to the flagrant injustices of our time — that the society of the future must be founded. The revenge that the people may exercise against their oppressors at the time of the revolution is perhaps historically just, but it is not upon this revenge that the future reign of the people can be founded after victory: it is rather on the principle of human solidarity. Likewise in questions of land and resource distribution.

And we should not be told that the bourgeoisie must first be repressed and that the victory of the working class must first lead to a mode of distribution that places labor at the proper position it deserves. The class struggle *ends* with the workers' victory and the distinction between workers and parasites no longer exists. With the possibility of free work in a free society being provided to everyone, the number of those who refuse it will be so small that it will not justify the creation of a new class of parasites in the form of an invasive bureaucracy, and in the next generation the traces of this old parasitism will have disappeared.

To give to each one in proportion to their work is, if you like, a just principle; but it is a justice of a lower order, such as, for instance, the idea of rewarding merit and punishing vice. We shall not dwell upon all the philosophical and practical reasons which lead us to reject this stance. What could we possibly add, moreover, to the arguments that Kropotkin provided when he laid the foundations of communist anarchism?¹⁹ Let us only say — for those comrades who are unaware of it — that at the other edge of socialist thought, Marx agreed with him, saying that “the narrow horizon of bourgeois law will only be overcome” when the remuneration of work has given way to the distribution of the tiller according to the needs of each individual.²⁰ We want to go beyond bourgeois law and bourgeois justice. Every human has a right to existence by the mere fact that they are human. Then, and also because they are human beings living in society, they will apply themselves to bring their share of work to the common treasure. This is the only possible guarantee against any further exploitation and against endless conflicts.

We therefore reject the very idea of a *wage* lifestyle; we differentiate the two questions: that of production and that of consumption, leaving between them only the link which results from the fact that the total quantity of manufactured products must be regulated according to the needs of consumption. This is the only order of things compatible with a system in which professional organizations can *manage* production without needing to *own* the instruments of labor. It is also the only one compatible with a free society, free from the coercive power of a State.

We do not believe, of course, that the very day after the next revolution, all of this will work out so well: without conflicts, without mixing with our past bourgeois elements. We know that it is highly unlikely that this complete and pure communism can be achieved at once. But we also know that that is only by being inspired that any future advancements can be made. And that is why it seems so important to us, so infinitely desirable, that it is in this spirit that the milestones of the future are laid.

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¹⁹ Ed: For further elaboration from Marie Goldsmith on Kropotkin’s ideas of anarchist communism, see “Kropotkin’s Communism,” translated in *Black Flag* Vol. 2 No. 3 (2022).

²⁰ K. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program.”