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**The revolutionary
workers movement
and the agrarian
question**

The exploitation of man by man in the domain of manufacturing industry arose in modern society with the emergence of capitalism, when the technical possibilities of associated labor began to be exploited. The worker was expropriated of the product of his labor and part of his labor power was taken from him and formed the profit of his employer. A simple schema like this cannot represent the relation between worker and employer in the domain of agriculture, where the revolution that is still underway has not substantially modified productive techniques, but only the juridical relations between socially defined persons. The basis of the agrarian economy is the occupation of land, at first established by the military power of strong tribes or groups or of military leaders who invaded the territories of other peoples or who settled in unpopulated regions. In reality, in order for the landlords to be able to avail themselves of human labor power, another prerequisite for the seizure of land by means of brute force is an economy based on the slave labor of conquered peoples. But in modern society, in which we are presently interested, slavery had already been abolished by the time the capitalist economy began to emerge. Feudal society was no longer a slave society.

The occupation of the land, which was not only preserved in the feudal regime but actually constituted the basis of that regime, is perfectly accepted and juridically sanctioned in the fully developed capitalist regime. In practical terms this means that the owner of a vast expanse of agricultural land, although he does not work on these lands, obtains from them the land

rent, without thereby being obliged to modify the productive technique of the workers that he exploits by introducing the resource of an associative form of activity.

In this way, large landholdings can exist without necessarily constituting single large enterprises; the latter is an institutional form wherein each worker has specialized tasks. There are large agrarian businesses. They have the character of capitalist enterprises except applied to agriculture; they involve an extensive incorporation of industrial capital in the land (such as machines, animals, various tools, etc.) and employ wage workers (agricultural laborers) who are pure proletarians. The owners of these big agricultural enterprises could be either the owners of the land itself, or large-scale rural leaseholders. Theoretically, a large industrial agrarian enterprise could also be superimposed on small-scale agrarian enterprise, if it is convenient for the capitalist to lease a large number of contiguous small private properties.

With regard to the ownership of very large tracts of land, this could prevail—and does prevail today—even in large capitalist countries, superimposed on small farm parcels, when the large landowner (the latifundist) has his land divided into small parcels, in each one of which a peasant family lives and works with primitive technology. In such a case, the worker is not totally expropriated of his product like the wage worker, but yields to the exploitation of the landlord a large part of his product, in kind (various types of crops) or in money (sharecropping or leaseholds). The sharecropper or the tenant farmer can therefore be considered a semi-proletarian. There

are also, in the purely modern bourgeois regime, small landholdings connected to small agricultural businesses.

The small-scale peasant landowner is a manual worker and generally has a quite low standard of living. But he is not a proletarian, because the entire product of his labor belongs to him; nor is he exactly a semi-proletarian, since he does not have to surrender any part of his product to another person. However, in the interplay of economic forces, he feels the impact of the demands of the privileged classes by way of high taxes, indebtedness to finance capital, etc. His social position is paralleled by that of the artisan although his legal position is different, being theoretically in the same category as the large landowner. In reality, capitalism, in order to rid itself of medieval obstacles, did not need to infringe upon the juridical institutions that affected real property; to the contrary, it adopted, almost to the letter, the framework of Roman law according to which, in theory, the same article of the legal code applies to parcels of land of less than an acre as well as to vast plantations.

What capitalism needed to destroy were those aspects of the feudal system that were of Germanic provenance, a system that made the small peasant exploited on the large estate an intermediate figure between the slave and the free laborer.

The “glebe serf”, besides having to endure veritable extortionate demands in delivering his quotas to the landlord and the church, was bound to his place of work. Capitalism had to free him from this servitude just as it had to liberate the

impoverished artisans from the shackles of the thousands of laws and rules governing the guilds, so that both, transformed into men free to sell their labor power anywhere, could constitute the reserve armies of production based on wage labor.

The shattering of these juridical bonds constituted the bourgeois revolution. It is of course true that the latter, which on the other hand, in theory, did not abolish the artisan class, left intact the principle of agricultural production based on landholdings, and did not consist, from the point of view of legislation, in a redistribution of private landed property.

There can be no doubt that, among the various forms of agricultural enterprises mentioned above, the one that is most compatible with capitalist industry is the large unified agricultural business, and the one that is least compatible with it is the small landholding; these can be juridically divided into two types: the “*minifundio*” and the “*latifundio*”.

It is not correct to define the *latifundio* as a survival of the feudal regime, since it survived intact after the violent and radical abolition of all feudal bonds. It may or may not have a tendency to fragmentation, just as small parcels may or may not have a tendency to be re-concentrated into large estates or modern large-scale agricultural enterprises. But such phenomena unfold, in the framework of the modern bourgeois regime, as a consequence of technical factors and economic trends.

What role does the cycle of transformation of agricultural production play in the clear condemnation of industrial capitalism set forth in the historical or communist schema, according to which the exploitation of labor power will be abolished with the conquest of rule over society by the workers?

With regard to the modern large agricultural business, the latter will rapidly be subjected to the same fate as manufacturing industry due to the fact that it is based on the technique of associated labor.

The agricultural wage laborers of these large enterprises, although they are burdened by the social and political handicap of not being concentrated together in large modern conglomerations, will march alongside the industrial proletariat on the road to the formation of revolutionary class potential.

The semi-proletarians, that is, the sharecroppers and leaseholders, although they cannot have the same degree of class consciousness, can expect to reap great social advantages from the revolution of the industrial proletariat, since the latter, although it will support in every stage of development the predominance of associative forms of labor and the concentration of small enterprises into larger ones, will be the only class that can radically abolish for the first time in history the system of private ownership of the land, at the same time as it abolishes industrial exploitation.

This does not mean that the small sharecropper or leaseholder will become landowners, but that they will be freed from the obligation to pay the tribute extracted from their labor power, in the form of money or payments in kind, that the landowners previously received. In other words, the revolution of the industrial proletariat will be capable of immediately abolishing the principle of land rent; furthermore, thanks to one of many dialectical relations that intervene in the succession of social and historical forms, it will be capable of abolishing the principle of land rent much more rapidly and completely than that of the profit of industrial capital.

As for the small landowner, the question is theoretically quite different, insofar as the land rent of his parcel presently accrues to his benefit and is not distinguished legally from the fruit of his own labor power. There can be no doubt that a revolution in this domain will only take place during a later stage, since all the small landholdings previously administered by sharecroppers, lessees or the small landowners themselves, will be consolidated into large socialized agricultural operations much more rapidly than this could have been done within the framework of the bourgeois economy.

Thus, one can by no means present the agrarian reflection of the proletarian revolution as an episode of redistribution or repartition of the land, nor as the conquest of the land by the peasants. The slogan, “small property instead of big property” does not make any sense. The slogan, “small agrarian business instead of big agrarian business” is 100% reactionary. With regard to this point, it is necessary to clarify which stages of this

cycle can be completed prior to the downfall of bourgeois power. It is a classical opportunist error to tell the rural masses that an industrial capitalist regime, no matter how advanced it may be, can abolish land rent. Land rent and industrial profit are not distinctive aspects of two different and opposed historical eras. They coexist perfectly well not only in the classical understanding of bourgeois law, but also in the economic processes of the accumulation of finance capital.

Despite the substantial differences that we have demonstrated up to this point that distinguish the two fields of production, land rent and profit have a common origin in the principle of the extraction from the worker of a part of his labor power and in the commercial character of the distribution of the products of industry and agriculture. In this manner, the slogan of socialization of land rent without a revolution of the working class is pure idiocy worthy of that other idiocy reflected in the slogan of the socialization of monopoly capital within the framework of the private economy.

Another opportunist position is that it is necessary to await the concentration of the agrarian economy into large enterprises before we can speak of a revolution that would socialize both industry and agriculture. Such a conception is defeatist, since the commercial nature of the bourgeois economy and its evolution within the framework of ever more speculative and exchange-oriented forms allow us to foresee that private capital will not be advanced on a large scale to land improvement business ventures, whose profits will be small and will furthermore require a long term delay prior to realizing

the payoff compared to the colossal industrial and banking capitalist business deals.

Now, the replacement of the small enterprise (whether it is unencumbered or enclosed by *latifundia*) by big business cannot take place without radical technological transformations. And these transformations will be all the more slowly introduced where, for natural reasons, they will prove to be difficult (irregular topography, shortages of water, infertility of the soil, etc.). Only an economy of a social character will be capable of mobilizing the enormous masses of productive forces needed for such a transformation.

Finally, the slogan of the distribution of the *latifundia* to the peasants in the bourgeois regime also makes no sense, as it attempts to promise an expropriation without indemnification, which is contrary to the institutions of the bourgeois state, and is purely demagogic in the periods when neither the State nor the capitalist class have mobilize the liquid capital and productive resources necessary for the elimination of some of the technical characteristics of the worst examples of the *latifundia*, such as the lack of housing, roads, canals, and potable water, as well as the presence of epidemic malaria, etc.

There can be no doubt that the agrarian program of the workers revolution will include, parallel to the suppression of all land rent, a temporary redistribution of the croplands at the level of management, insofar as this will enable a uniform application of the labor power of that part of the peasant class

that cannot be socially established among the workers of the collective enterprises.

In any event, this new redistribution will affect not the ownership but the distribution of management of the surface of the land and will not be able to assume, in modern capitalist countries, the social or historical dimension it assumed in Russia in 1917, where the conquest of power by the industrial proletariat not only achieved the first suppression of the principle of land rent but also the suppression of the feudal agrarian regime, which had continued to be practically in full force in the Czarist empire after the abolition of glebe serfdom promulgated in 1861.

In the typical capitalist country, the revolutionary industrial working class will embrace without restrictions the agricultural worker of the large enterprises and in this way prevent the regression of the rural laborer to the condition of the small peasant. It could consider the semi-proletarian sharecroppers and leaseholders as allies; tolerating their aspiration to the free use of their land, something that only the revolution can achieve. Only with great caution and as a temporary measure could it expect any positive support from the small peasant landowners who have not yet been ruined and proletarianized by capitalism. It is even possible that, in periods of crisis of the industrial apparatus due to war and defeat, one could expect that the majority of the small rural landowners, exploiting the economic crisis thanks to the high prices of agricultural products and seeing their social position become more stable, and also in view of their incapacity as a class to weather long-

term historical cycles, could support the policies of the conservative parties.

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The Spanish translation can be found online at:

<http://www.sinistra.net/lib/upt/elproc/mopa/mopaffibis.html>

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- 1. This text on the “agrarian question” reproduced here, was first published in 1947 in our journal, *Prometeo* (First Series, No. 8); it is a manifestation of our incessant struggle to defend the principles and the classic position of Marxism against all distortions. It is a continuation of the battle that links the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* with Engels’ critique of the agrarian program of the Congress of Nantes in France in 1894 and the theses on the agrarian question of the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920; the latter expressed just one of the many aspects of the struggle of the Third International against both social democratic opportunism (reformist and centrist) and anarchistic infantilism.

As our text sketches a picture of the social relations the revolution encounters in the domain of agriculture, it sets forth the positions of the orthodox communist movement with respect to its agrarian challenges and provides a general political orientation with particular reference to the lower layers of the peasant class. This goal, one of the

pillars of our struggle, is above all directed against to Stalinism, which presented—as its heirs continue to do—the communist revolution as the work of a class bloc placed on the same level (workers and peasants) and, secondly, against the numerous critics of Stalinism who, under the pretext of maintaining a “revolutionary purity” that is both purely verbal as well as historically impotent, “exclude” the semi-proletarians and poor peasants from the strategy of the revolutionary proletariat.

This text is all the more important for the world revolution, insofar as the peasant question still possesses—and in the capitalist regime this will never change—a considerable significance on an international scale. [Note added by the editors of *El programa comunista* in 1975]