

On the Content of Socialism (1955–1957): Excerpts

From the Critique of Bureaucracy to the Idea of the Proletariat's Autonomy (1955)*

The ideas set forth in this discussion will perhaps be understood more readily if we retrace the route that has led us to them. Indeed, we started off from positions in which a militant worker or a Marxist inevitably places himself at a certain stage in his development – positions therefore that everyone we are addressing has shared at one time or another. And if the conceptions set forth here have any value at all, their development cannot be the result of chance or personal traits but ought to embody an objective logic at work. Providing a description of this development, therefore, can only increase the reader's understanding of the end result and make it easier for him to check it against his experience.¹

Like a host of other militants in the vanguard, we began with the discovery that the traditional large 'working-class' organizations no longer have a revolutionary Marxist politics nor do they represent any longer the interests of the proletariat. The Marxist arrives at this conclusion by comparing the activity of these 'socialist' (reformist) or 'communist' (Stalinist) organizations with his own theory. He sees the so-called Socialist parties participating in bourgeois governments, actively repressing strikes or movements of colonial peoples, and championing the defence of the capitalist fatherland while neglecting even to make reference to a socialist system of rule [*régime*]. He sees the Stalinist 'Communist' parties sometimes carrying out this same opportunistic policy of collaboration with the bourgeoisie and sometimes an 'extremist' policy, a violent adventurism unrelated to a consistent revolutionary strategy. The class-conscious worker makes the same discoveries on the level of his working-class experience. He sees the socialists squandering their energies trying to moderate his class's economic demands, to make any

* 'Sur le contenu du socialisme', *S. ou B.*, 17 (July 1955). Reprinted as *CS I* in *CS*, pp. 67–102. Preceding the article was the following note: 'This article opens up a discussion on programmatic problems, which will be continued in forthcoming issues of *Socialisme ou Barbarie*.' [T/E: The present abridged version of *CS I* reprints the introductory section (*PSW* 1, pp. 290–7).]

effective action aimed at satisfying these demands impossible, and to substitute for the strike interminable discussions with the boss or the State. He sees the Stalinists at certain times strictly forbidding strikes (as was the case from 1945 to 1947) and even trying to curtail them through violence² or frustrating them underhandedly³ and at other times trying to horsewhip workers into a strike they do not want because they perceive that it is alien to their interests (as in 1951–2, with the ‘anti-American’ strikes). Outside the factory, he also sees the Socialists and the Communists participate in capitalist governments without it changing his lot one bit, and he sees them join forces, in 1936 as well as in 1945, when his class is ready to act and the regime has its back against the wall, in order to stop the movement and save this regime, proclaiming that one must ‘know to end a strike’ and that one must ‘produce first and make economic demands later’.

Once they have established this radical opposition between the attitude of the traditional organizations and a revolutionary Marxist politics expressing the immediate and historical interests of the proletariat, both the Marxist and the class-conscious worker might then think that these organizations ‘err’ [*se trompent*] or that they ‘are betraying us’. But to the extent that they reflect on the situation, and discover for themselves that reformists and Stalinists behave the same way day after day, that they have always and everywhere behaved in this way, in the past, today, here and everywhere else, they begin to see that to speak of ‘betrayal’ or ‘mistakes’ does not make any sense. It could be a question of ‘mistakes’ only if these parties pursued the goals of the proletarian revolution with inadequate means, but these means, applied in a coherent and systematic fashion for several dozen years, show simply that the goals of these organizations are not our goals, that they express interests other than those of the proletariat. Once this is understood, saying that they ‘are betraying us’ makes no sense. If, in order to sell his junk, a merchant tells me a load of crap and tries to persuade me that it is in my interest to buy it, I can say that he is trying to deceive me [*il me trompe*] but not that he is betraying me. Likewise, the Socialist or Stalinist party, in trying to persuade the proletariat that it represents its interests, is trying to deceive it but is not betraying it; they betrayed it once and for all a long time ago, and since then they are not traitors to the working class but consistent and faithful servants of other interests. What we need to do is determine whose interests they serve.

Indeed, this policy does not merely appear consistent in its means or in its results. It is embodied in the leadership stratum of these organizations or trade unions. The militant quickly learns the hard way that this stratum is irremovable, that it survives all defeats, and that it perpetuates itself through co-option. Whether the internal organization of these groups is ‘democratic’ (as is the case with the reformists) or dictatorial (as is the case with the Stalinists), the mass of militants have absolutely no influence over its

orientation, which is determined without further appeal by a bureaucracy whose stability is never put into question; for even when the leadership core should happen to be replaced, it is replaced for the benefit of another, no less bureaucratic group.

At this point, the Marxist and the class-conscious worker are almost bound to collide with Trotskyism.⁴ Indeed, Trotskyism has offered a permanent, step-by-step critique of reformist and Stalinist politics for the past quarter-century, showing that the defeats of the workers' movement – Germany, 1923; China, 1925–7; England, 1926; Germany, 1933; Austria, 1934; France, 1936; Spain, 1936–8; France and Italy, 1945–7; etc. – are due to the policies of the traditional organizations, and that these policies have constantly been in breach of Marxism. At the same time, Trotskyism⁵ offers an explanation of the policies of these parties, starting from a sociological analysis of their makeup. For reformism, it takes up again the interpretation provided by Lenin: The reformism of the socialists expresses the interests of a labour aristocracy (since imperialist surplus profits allow the latter to be 'corrupted' by higher wages) and of a trade-union and political bureaucracy. As for Stalinism, its policy serves the Russian bureaucracy, this parasitic and privileged stratum that has usurped power in the first workers' State, thanks to the backward character of the country and the setback suffered by the world revolution after 1923.

We began our critical work, even back when we were within the Trotskyist movement, with this problem of Stalinist bureaucracy. Why we began with that problem in particular needs no long involved explanations. Whereas the problem of reformism seemed to be settled by history, at least on the theoretical level, as it became more and more an overt defender of the capitalist system,⁶ on the most crucial problem of all, that of Stalinism – which is *the* contemporary problem *par excellence* and which in practice weighs on us more heavily than the first – the history of our times has disproved again and again both the Trotskyist viewpoint and the forecasts that have been derived from it. For Trotsky, Stalinist policy is to be explained by the interests of the Russian bureaucracy, a product of the degeneration of the October Revolution. This bureaucracy has no 'reality of its own', historically speaking; it is only an 'accident', the product of the constantly upset balance between the two fundamental forces of modern society, capitalism and the proletariat. Even in Russia it is based upon the 'conquests of October', which had provided socialist bases for the country's economy (nationalization, planning, monopoly over foreign trade, etc.), and upon the perpetuation of capitalism in the rest of the world; for the restoration of private property in Russia would signify the overthrow of the bureaucracy and help bring about the return of the capitalists, whereas the spread of the revolution worldwide would destroy Russia's isolation – the economic and political result of which was the bureaucracy – and would give rise to a new revolutionary explosion

of the Russian proletariat, who would chase off these usurpers. Hence the necessarily empirical character of Stalinist politics, which is obliged to waver between two adversaries and makes its objective the utopian maintenance of the status quo; it even is obliged thereby to sabotage every proletarian movement any time the latter endangers the capitalist system and to over-compensate as well for the results of these acts of sabotage with extreme violence every time reactionaries, encouraged by the demoralization of the proletariat, try to set up a dictatorship and prepare a capitalist crusade against 'the remnants of the October conquests'. Thus, Stalinist parties are condemned to fluctuate between 'extremist' adventurism and opportunism.

But neither can these parties nor the Russian bureaucracy remain hanging indefinitely in midair like this. In the absence of a revolution, Trotsky said, the Stalinist parties would become more and more like the reformist parties and more and more attached to the bourgeois order, while the Russian bureaucracy would be overthrown with or without foreign intervention so as to bring about a restoration of capitalism.

Trotsky had tied this prognostication to the outcome of the Second World War. As is well known, this war disproved it in the most glaring terms. The Trotskyist leadership made itself look ridiculous by stating that it was just a matter of time. But it had become apparent to us, even before the war ended, that it was not and could not have been a question of some kind of time lag but, rather, of the *direction* of history, and that Trotsky's entire edifice was, down to its very foundations, mythological.

The Russian bureaucracy underwent the critical test of the war and showed it had as much cohesiveness as any other dominant class. If the Russian regime admitted of some contradictions, it also exhibited a degree of stability no less than that of the American or German regime. The Stalinist parties did not go over to the side of the bourgeois order. They have continued to follow Russian policy faithfully (apart, of course, from individual defections, as take place in all parties): they are partisans of national defence in countries allied to the USSR, adversaries of this kind of defence in countries that are enemies of the USSR (we include here the French CP's series of turnabouts in 1939, 1941, and 1947). Finally, the most important and extraordinary thing was that the Stalinist bureaucracy extended its power into other countries; whether it imposed its power on behalf of the Russian army, as in most of the satellite countries of Central Europe and the Balkans, or had complete domination over a confused mass movement, as in Yugoslavia (or later on in China and in Vietnam), it instaurated in these countries regimes that were in every respect similar to the Russian regime (taking into account, of course, local conditions). It was obviously ridiculous to describe these regimes as degenerated workers' States.⁷

From then on, therefore, we were obliged to look into what gave such stability and opportunities for expansion to the Stalinist bureaucracy, both

in Russia and elsewhere. To do this, we had to resume the analysis of Russia's economic and social system of rule. Once rid of the Trotskyist outlook, it was easy to see, using the basic categories of Marxism, that Russian society is divided into classes, among which the two fundamental ones are the bureaucracy and the proletariat. The bureaucracy there plays the role of the dominant, exploiting class in the full sense of the term. It is not merely that it is a privileged class and that its unproductive consumption absorbs a part of the social product comparable to (and probably greater than) that absorbed by the unproductive consumption of the bourgeoisie in private capitalist countries. It also has sovereign control over how the total social product will be used. It does this first of all by determining how the total social product will be distributed among wages and surplus value (at the same time that it tries to dictate to the workers the lowest wages possible and to extract from them the greatest amount of labour possible), next by determining how this surplus value will be distributed between its own unproductive consumption and new investments, and finally by determining how these investments will be distributed among the various sectors of production.

But the bureaucracy can control how the social product will be utilized only because it controls production. Because it *manages* production at the factory level, it can always make the workers produce more for the same wage; because it manages production on the societal level, it can decide to manufacture cannons and silk rather than housing and cotton. We discover, therefore, that the essence, the foundation, of its bureaucratic domination over Russian society comes from the fact that it has dominance within the relations of production; at the same time, we discover that this same function has always been the basis for the domination of one class over society. In other words, at every instant the effective essence of class relations in production is the antagonistic division of those who participate in the production process into two fixed and stable categories, directors and executives. Everything else is concerned with the sociological and juridical mechanisms that guarantee the stability of the managerial stratum; that is how it is with feudal ownership of the land, capitalist private property, or this strange form of private, nonpersonal property ownership that characterizes present-day capitalism; that is how it is in Russia with the 'Communist Party', the totalitarian dictatorship by the organ that expresses the bureaucracy's general interests and that ensures that the members of the ruling class are recruited through co-optation on the scale of society as a whole.⁸

It follows that planning and the nationalization of the means of production in no way resolve the problem of the class character of the economy, nor do they signify the abolition of exploitation; of course, they entail the abolition of the former dominant classes, but they do not answer the

fundamental problem of who will now direct production and how. If a new stratum of individuals takes over this function of direction, 'all the old rubbish' Marx spoke about will quickly reappear, for this stratum will use its managerial position to create privileges for itself, it will reinforce its monopoly over managerial functions, in this way tending to make its domination more complete and more difficult to put into question; it will tend to assure the transmission of these privileges to its successors, etc.

For Trotsky, the bureaucracy is not a ruling class since bureaucratic privileges cannot be transmitted by inheritance. But in dealing with this argument, we need only recall (1) that hereditary transmission is in no way an element necessary to establish the category of 'ruling class', and (2) that, moreover, it is obvious how, in Russia, membership of the bureaucracy (not, of course, some particular bureaucratic post) can be passed down; a measure such as the abolition of free secondary education (laid down in 1936) suffices to set up an inexorable sociological mechanism assuring that only the children of bureaucrats will be able to enter into the career of being a bureaucrat. That, in addition, the bureaucracy might want to try (using educational grants or aptitude tests 'based upon merit alone') to bring in talented people from the proletariat or the peasantry not only does not contradict but even confirms its character as an exploiting class: similar mechanisms have always existed in capitalist countries, and their social function is to reinvigorate the ruling stratum with new blood, to mitigate in part the irrationalities resulting from the hereditary character of managerial functions, and to emasculate the exploited classes by corrupting their most gifted members.

It is easy to see that it is not a question here of a problem particular to Russia or to the 1920s. For the same problem is posed in every modern society, even apart from the proletarian revolution; it is just another expression of the process of concentration of the forces of production. What, indeed, creates the *objective* possibility for a bureaucratic degeneration of the revolution? It is the inexorable movement of the modern economy, under the pressure of technique, toward the more and more intense concentration of capital and power, the incompatibility of the actual degree of development of the forces of production with private property and the market as the way in which business enterprises are integrated. This movement is expressed in a host of structural transformations in Western capitalist countries, though we cannot dwell upon that right now. We need only recall that they are socially incarnated in a new bureaucracy, an economic bureaucracy as well as a workplace bureaucracy. Now, by making a *tabula rasa* of private property, of the market, etc., revolution *can* – if it stops at that point – make the route to total bureaucratic concentration easier. We see, therefore, that, far from being deprived of its own reality, bureaucracy personifies the final stage of capitalist development.

Since then it has become obvious that the programme of the socialist

revolution and the proletariat's objective could no longer be merely the suppression of private property, the nationalization of the means of production and planning, but, rather, *workers' management* of the economy and of power. Returning to the degeneration of the Russian Revolution, we established that on the economic level the Bolshevik Party had as its programme not *workers' management* but *workers' control*. This was because the Party, which did not think the revolution could immediately be a socialist revolution, did not even pose for itself the task of expropriating the capitalists, and therefore thought that this latter class would remain as managers in the workplace. Under such conditions, the function of workers' control would be to prevent the capitalists from organizing to sabotage production, to gain control over their profits and over the disposition of the product, and to set up a 'school' of management for the workers. But this sociological monstrosity of a country where the proletariat exercises its dictatorship through the instrument of the soviets and of the Bolshevik Party, and where the capitalists keep their property and continue to direct their enterprises, could not last; where the capitalists had not fled they were expelled by the workers, who then took over the management of these enterprises.

This first experience of workers' management lasted only a short time; we cannot go into an analysis here of this period of the Russian Revolution (which is quite obscure and about which few sources exist),⁹ or of the factors that determined the rapid changeover of power in the factories into the hands of a new managerial stratum. Among these factors are the backward state of the country, the proletariat's numerical and cultural weakness, the dilapidated condition of the productive apparatus, the long civil war with its unprecedented violence, and the international isolation of the revolution. There is one factor whose effect during this period we wish to emphasize: in its actions, the Bolshevik Party's policy was systematically opposed to workers' management and tended from the start to set up its own apparatus for directing production, responsible solely to the central power, i.e., in the last analysis, to the Party. This was done in the name of efficiency and the overriding necessities brought on by the civil war. Whether this policy was the most effective one even in the short term is open to question; in any case, in the long run it laid the foundations for bureaucracy.

If the management [*direction*] of the economy thus eluded the proletariat, Lenin thought the essential thing was for the power of the soviets to preserve for the workers at least the leadership [*direction*] of the State. On the other hand, he thought that by participating in the management of the economy through workers' control, trade unions, and so on, the working class would gradually 'learn' to manage. Nevertheless, a series of events that cannot be retraced here, but that were inevitable, quickly made the Bolshevik Party's domination over the soviets irreversible. From this point onward, the proletarian character of the whole system hinged on the proletarian character of

the Bolshevik Party. We could easily show that under such conditions the Party, a highly centralized minority with monopoly control over the exercise of power, would no longer be able to preserve even its proletarian character (in the strong sense of this term), and that it was bound to separate itself from the class from which it had arisen. But there is no need to go as far as that. In 1923 'the Party numbered 50,000 workers and 300,000 functionaries in its total of 350,000 members. It no longer was a workers' party but a party of workers-turned-functionaries.'¹⁰ Bringing together the 'elite' of the proletariat, the Party had been led to install this elite in the command posts of the economy and the State; hence this elite had to be accountable only to the Party, i.e. to itself. The working class's 'apprenticeship' in management merely signified that a certain number of workers, who were learning managerial techniques, left the rank and file and passed over to the side of the new bureaucracy. As people's social existence determines their consciousness, the Party members were going to act from then on, not according to the Bolshevik programme, but in terms of their concrete situation as privileged managers of the economy and the State. The trick has been played, the revolution has died, and if there is something to be surprised about, it is, rather, how long it took for the bureaucracy to consolidate its power.¹¹

The conclusions that follow from this brief analysis are clear: The programme of the socialist revolution can be nothing other than *workers' management*. Workers' management of power, i.e. the power of the masses' autonomous organizations (soviets or councils); workers' management of the economy, i.e. the producers' direction of production, also organized in soviet-style organs. The proletariat's objective cannot be nationalization and planning without anything more, because that would signify that the domination of society would be handed over to a new stratum of rulers and exploiters; it cannot be achieved by handing over power to a party, however revolutionary and however proletarian this party might be at the outset, because this party will inevitably tend to exercise this power on its own behalf and will be used as the nucleus for the crystallization of a new ruling stratum. Indeed, in our time the problem of the division of society into classes appears more and more in its most direct and naked form, and stripped of all juridical cover, as the problem of the division of society into directors and executants. The proletarian revolution carries out its historical programme only in so far as it tends from the very beginning to abolish this division by reabsorbing every particular managerial stratum and by *collectivizing*, or more exactly by *completely socializing*, the functions of direction. The problem of the proletariat's historical capacity to achieve a classless society is not the problem of its capacity physically to overthrow the exploiters who are in power (of this there is no doubt); it is, rather, the problem of how positively to organize a collective, socialized management of production and power. From then on

it becomes obvious that the realization of socialism on the proletariat's behalf by any party or bureaucracy whatsoever is an absurdity, a contradiction in terms, a square circle, an underwater bird; socialism is nothing but the masses' conscious and perpetual self-managerial activity. It becomes equally obvious that socialism cannot be 'objectively' inscribed, not even halfway, in any law or constitution, in the nationalization of the means of production, or in planning, nor even in a 'law' instaurating workers' management: if the working class cannot manage, no law can give it the power to do so, and if it does manage, such a 'law' would merely ratify this existing state of affairs.

Thus, beginning with a critique of the bureaucracy, we have succeeded in formulating a positive conception of the content of socialism; briefly speaking, 'socialism in all its aspects does not signify anything other than workers' management of society', and 'the working class can free itself only by achieving power for itself'. The proletariat can carry out the socialist revolution only if it acts autonomously, i.e. if it finds in itself both the will and the consciousness for the necessary transformation of society. Socialism can be neither the fated result of historical development, a violation of history by a party of supermen, nor still the application of a programme derived from a theory that is true in itself. Rather, it is the unleashing of the free creative activity of the oppressed masses. Such an unleashing of free creative activity is made *possible* by historical development, and the action of a party based on *this* theory can *facilitate* it to a tremendous degree.

Henceforth it is indispensable to develop on every level the consequences of this idea. [. . .]

Notes

- 1 In so far as this introduction gives a brief summary of the analysis of various problems already treated in this Review, we have taken the liberty of referring the reader to the corresponding articles published in *S. ou B.*
- 2 The April 1947 strike at Renault, the first great postwar working-class explosion in France, was able to take place only after the workers fought physically with Stalinist union officials.
- 3 See in *S. ou B.*, 13 (January 1954), pp. 34-46, the detailed description of the way in which the Stalinists were able to 'scuttle' the August 1953 strike at Renault without overtly opposing it.
- 4 Or with other, essentially similar currents (Bordigism, for example).
- 5 Among its serious representatives, which virtually amounts to just Trotsky himself. Present-day Trotskyists, knocked about by reality as no ideological current has ever been knocked about before, have reached such a degree of political and ideological decomposition that nothing precise can be said about them at all.
- 6 In the last analysis, our ultimate conception of working-class bureaucracy leads to a revision of the traditional Leninist conception of reformism. But we cannot dwell here on this question.
- 7 See the 'Lettre ouverte aux militants du P.C.I. et de la "IV^e Internationale"' in *S. ou B.*, 1 (March 1949), pp. 90-101. [T/E: This article, 'Open Letter to P.C.I. and "Fourth

International" Militants', is reprinted in *SB I*, pp. 185–204 (and now reprinted again in *SB**, pp. 145–58).]

8 See *RPR*.

9 1979 Note: See now *RBI* and the Brinton text cited therein [T/E: Maurice Brinton, *Bolsheviks & Workers' Control* (London: Solidarity, 1970; Detroit: Black & Red, 1975)].

10 Victor Serge, *Russia Twenty Years After*, trans. Max Shachtman (New York: Hillman-Curl, 1937), p. 150.

11 See *SB*.

On the Content of Socialism, II (1957)*

[Introduction]

The development of modern society and what has happened to the working-class movement over the last hundred years (and in particular since 1917) have compelled us to make a radical revision of the ideas on which that movement has been based.

Forty years have elapsed since the proletarian revolution seized power in Russia. From that revolution it is not socialism that ultimately emerged but a new and monstrous form of exploiting society and totalitarian oppression that differed from the worst forms of capitalism only in that the bureaucracy replaced the private owners of capital and 'the plan' took the place of the 'free market'. Ten years ago only a few people like us defended these ideas. Since then the Hungarian workers have brought them to the world's attention.

Among the raw materials for such a revision are the vast experience of the Russian Revolution and of its degeneration, the Hungarian workers' councils, their actions, and their programme. But these are far from being the only elements useful for making such a revision. A look at modern capitalism and at the type of conflict it breeds shows that throughout the world working

* Originally published as 'Sur le contenu du socialisme', *S. ou B.*, 22 (July 1957). Reprinted as *CS II* in *CS*, pp. 103–221. The text was preceded by the following note:

The first part of this text was published in *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, no. 17, pp. 1–22. The following pages represent a new draft of the entire text and a reading of the previously published part is not presupposed. This text opens a discussion on programmatic questions. The positions expressed here do not necessarily express the point of view of the entire *Socialisme ou Barbarie* group.

[T/E: This text was originally published by Maurice Brinton under the title *Workers' Councils and the Economics of a Self-Managed Society* (London: Solidarity, 1972), with 'Our Preface'. It was reprinted by Philadelphia Solidarity in 1974 (with forewords by Philadelphia Solidarity and the League for Economic Democracy) and 1984 as a Wooden Shoe Pamphlet (with a statement about the group, Philadelphia Solidarity, entitled 'About Ourselves', and a new introduction by Peter Dorman, 'Workers Councils . . . 25 Years Later'). In editing Brinton's translation, I have retained the headings he has added to the text, placing them in square brackets. *CS II* appeared in full in *PSW* 2, pp. 90–154. To save space, the present abridged version omits some of the more technical sections.]