

MONTHLY REVIEW

AN INDEPENDENT SOCIALIST MAGAZINE

[Home](#) › [2018](#) › [Volume 70, Issue 01 \(May 2018\)](#) › Revolution or Decadence?

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Revolution or Decadence?

Thoughts on the Transition between Modes of Production on the Occasion of the Marx Bicentennial

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([May 01, 2018](#))

Topics: [History](#) , [Marxism](#) , [Movements](#) , [Revolutions](#) □ Places: [Asia](#) , [China](#) , [Europe](#)

Introduction

Karl Marx is a giant thinker, not just for the nineteenth century, but even more for understanding our contemporary time. No other attempt to develop an understanding of society has been as fertile, provided “Marxists” move beyond “Marxology” (simply repeating what Marx was able to write in relation to his own time) and instead pursue his method in accordance with new developments in history. Marx himself continuously developed and revised his views throughout his lifetime.

Marx never reduced capitalism to a new mode of production. He considered all the dimensions of modern capitalist society, understanding that the law of value does not regulate only capitalist accumulation, but rules all aspects of modern civilization. That unique vision allowed him to offer the first scientific approach relating social



Thomas Couture, *Romans during the Decadence*, 1847.


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relations to the wider realm of anthropology. In that perspective, he included in his analyses what is today called “ecology,” rediscovered a century after Marx. John Bellamy Foster, better than anybody else, has cleverly developed this early intuition of Marx.

World Forum in Dakar, Senegal, and the author of many books, most recently *Modern Imperialism*, *Monopoly Finance Capital*, and *Marx's Law of Value* (Monthly Review Press, 2018).

I have given priority to another intuition of Marx, related to the future of globalization. From my PhD thesis in 1957 to my latest book, I have devoted my efforts to unequal development resulting from a globalized formulation of the law of accumulation. I derived from it an explanation for the revolutions in the name of socialism starting from the peripheries of the global system. The contribution of Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, introducing the concept of surplus, has been decisive in my attempt.

I also share another intuition of Marx—expressed clearly as early as 1848 and further reformulated until his last writings—according to which capitalism represents only a short bracket in history; its historical function being to have created in a short time (a century) the conditions calling for moving beyond to communism, understood as a higher stage of civilization.

Marx states in the Manifesto (1848) that class struggle always results “either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” That sentence has been at the forefront of my thinking for a long time. 

For that reason I offer my reflections on “Revolution or Decadence?” the concluding chapter of my forthcoming book for the bicentenary of the birth of Marx.

1

The workers' and socialist movement has sustained itself on a vision of a series of revolutions beginning in the advanced capitalist countries. From the criticisms which Marx and Frederick Engels made of the programs of German social democracy to the conclusions derived by Bolshevism from the experience of the Russian Revolution, the workers' and socialist movement has never conceived of the transition to socialism on the world scale in any other way.

However, over the past seventy-five years the transformation of the world has taken other paths. The perspective of revolution has disappeared from the horizons of the advanced West, while socialist revolutions have been limited to the periphery of the system. These have inaugurated developments of sufficient ambiguity for some people to see them only as a stage in the expansion of capitalism to the world scale. An analysis of the system in terms of unequal development attempts to give a different answer. Beginning with the contemporary imperialist system, this analysis obliges us also to consider the nature and meaning of unequal development in previous historical stages.

The comparative history of the transition from one mode of production to another calls for posing the question of the mode of transition in general and theoretical terms. Thus, similarities between the current situation and the era of the end of the Roman Empire have led those historians who are not

proponents of historical materialism to draw parallels between the two situations. On the other hand, a certain dogmatic interpretation of Marxism has used the terminology of historical materialism to obscure thought on this theme. Thus Soviet historians spoke of the “decadence of Rome,” while putting forward the “socialist revolution” as the only form of substitution of new relations of production for capitalist relations. The following comparative analysis of the form and content of the ancient and the capitalist crises in relations of production addresses this issue. Do the differences between these two crises justify treating one in terms of “decadence” and the other in terms of “revolution”?

My central argument is that a definite parallel exists between these two crises. In both cases, the system is in crisis because the centralization of the surplus it organizes is excessive, that is, is in advance of the relations of production that underlie it. Thus the development of the productive forces in the periphery of the system necessitates the breakup of the system and the substitution of a decentralized system for collecting and utilizing the surplus.



2

The most commonly accepted thesis within historical materialism is that of the succession of three modes of production: the slave mode, the feudal mode, and the capitalist mode. In this framework, the decadence of Rome would be only the expression of the transition from slavery to serfdom. It would still remain to explain why we do not speak of a “feudal revolution” as we speak of bourgeois and socialist revolutions.

I consider this formulation to be West-centered in its overgeneralization of the specific characteristics of the history of the West and its rejection of the history of other peoples in all its particularities. Choosing to derive the laws of historical materialism from universal experience, I have proposed an alternative formulation of one precapitalist mode, the tributary mode, toward which all class societies tend. The history of the West—the construction of Roman antiquity, its disintegration, the establishment of feudal Europe, and, finally, the crystallization of absolutist states in the mercantilist period—thus expresses in a particular form the same basic tendency that elsewhere is expressed in the less discontinuous construction of complete, tributary states, of which China is the strongest expression. The slave mode is not universal, as are the tributary and capitalist modes; it is particular and appears strictly in connection with the extension of commodity relations. In addition, the feudal mode is the primitive, incomplete form of the tributary mode.



This hypothesis views the establishment and subsequent disintegration of Rome as a premature attempt at tributary construction. The level of development of the productive forces did not require tributary centralization on the scale of the Roman Empire. This first abortive attempt was thus followed by a forced transition through feudal fragmentation, on the basis of which centralization was once again restored within the framework of the absolutist monarchies of the West. Only then did the mode of production in the West approach the complete tributary model. It was, furthermore, only beginning with this stage that the previous level of development of the productive forces in the West attained that of the complete tributary mode of imperial China; this is doubtless no coincidence.

The backwardness of the West, expressed by the abortion of Rome and by feudal fragmentation,

certainly gave it its historic advantage. Indeed, the combination of specific elements of the ancient tributary mode and of barbarian communal modes characterized feudalism and gave the West its flexibility. This explains the speed with which Europe passed through the complete tributary phase, quickly surpassing the level of development of the productive forces of the West, which it overtook, and passing on to capitalism. This flexibility and speed contrasted with the relatively rigid and slow evolution of the complete tributary modes of the Orient.

Doubtless the Roman-Western case is not the only example of an abortive tributary construction. We can identify at least three other cases of this type, each with its own specific conditions: the Byzantine-Arab-Ottoman case, the Indian case, the Mongol case. In each of these instances, attempts to install tributary systems of centralization were too far ahead of the requirements of the development of the productive forces to be firmly established. In each case, the forms of centralization were probably specific combinations of state, para-feudal, and commodity means. In the Islamic state, for instance, commodity centralization played the decisive role. Successive Indian failures must be related to the contents of Hindu ideology, which I have contrasted with Confucianism. As to the centralization of the empire of Genghis Khan, it was, as we know, extremely short-lived.

3

The contemporary imperialist system is also a system of centralization of the surplus on the world scale. This centralization operates on the basis of the fundamental laws of the capitalist mode and in the conditions of its domination over the precapitalist modes of the subject periphery. I have formulated the law of the accumulation of capital on the world scale as a form of expression of the law of value operating on this scale. The imperialist system for the centralization of value is characterized by the acceleration of accumulation and by the development of the productive forces in the center of the system, while in the periphery these latter are held back and deformed. Development and underdevelopment are two sides of the same coin.

Thus we can see that further development of the productive forces in the periphery requires the destruction of the imperialist system of centralization of the surplus. A necessary phase of decentralization, the establishment of the socialist transition within nations must precede the reunification at a higher level of development, which a planetary classless society would constitute. This central thesis has several consequences for the theory and strategy of the socialist transition.

In the periphery, the socialist transition is not distinct from national liberation. It has become clear that the latter is impossible under local bourgeois leadership, and thus becomes a democratic stage in the process of the uninterrupted revolution by stages led by the peasant and worker masses. This fusion of the goals of national liberation and socialism engenders in its turn a series of new problems that we must evaluate. For the emphasis shifts from one aspect to the other, due to which the real movement of society alternates between progress and regression, ambivalences and alienation, particularly in nationalist form. Here again we can make a comparison with the attitude of the barbarians toward the Roman Empire: they were ambivalent toward it, notably in their formal, even slavish, imitation of the Roman model against which they were revolting.

At the same time, the parasitical character of the central society intensifies. In some, imperial tribute corrupted the plebeians and paralyzed their revolt. In the societies of the imperialist center, a growing portion of the population benefits from unproductive employment and from privileged positions, both concentrated there by the effects of the unequal international division of labor. Thus it is harder to envision disengagement from the imperialist system and formation of an anti-imperialist alliance capable of overturning the hegemonic alliance and inaugurating the transition to socialism.

4

The introduction of new relations of production seems easier in the periphery than in the center of the system. In the Roman Empire, feudal relations took hold rapidly in Gaul and Germany, but only slowly in Italy and the East. It is Rome which invented serfdom which replaced slavery. But feudal authority developed elsewhere and feudal relations never fully developed in Italy itself.


Today the feeling of latent revolt against capitalist relations is very strong in the center, but it is powerless. People want to “change their lives” but cannot even change the government. Thus progress occurs in the area of social life more than in the organization of production and the state. The silent revolution in lifestyle, the breakup of the family, the collapse of bourgeois values demonstrate this contradictory aspect of the process. In the periphery, customs and ideas are often far less advanced, but socialist states have nonetheless been established there.

Vulgar Marxist tradition has effected a mechanistic reduction of the dialectic of social change. The revolution—the objective content of which is the abolition of old relations of production and the establishment of new relations, the precondition for the further development of the productive forces—is made into a natural law: the application to the social realm of the law by which quantity becomes quality. The class struggle reveals this objective necessity: only the vanguard—the party—is above the fray, makes and dominates history, is de-alienated. The political moment defining the revolution is that in which the vanguard seizes the state. Leninism itself is not entirely devoid of the positivist reductionism of the Marxism of the Second International.


This theory that separates the vanguard from the class is not applicable to the revolutions of the past. The bourgeois revolution did not take this form: in it the bourgeoisie co-opted the struggle of the peasants against the feudal lords. The ideology that enabled them to do this, far from being a means of manipulation, was itself alienating. In this sense, there was no “bourgeois revolution”—the term itself is a product of bourgeois ideology—but only a class struggle led by the bourgeoisie or, at most, at times a peasant revolution co-opted by the bourgeoisie. Even less can we speak of the “feudal revolution,” where the transition was made unconsciously.

The socialist revolution will be of a different type, presupposing de-alienated consciousness, because it will aim for the first time at the abolition of all exploitation and not at the substitution of new for old forms of exploitation. But this will be possible only if the ideology animating it becomes something other than the consciousness of the requirements of the development of the productive forces. There is nothing to say, in fact, that the statist mode of production, as a new form of relations of exploitation, is not a possible response to the requirements of this development.

Only people make their own history. Neither animals nor inanimate objects control their own evolution; they are subject to it. The concept of praxis is proper to society, as an expression of the synthesis of determinism and human intervention. The dialectic relation of infrastructure and superstructure is also proper to society and has no equivalent in nature. This relation is not unilateral. The superstructure is not the reflection of the needs of the infrastructure. If it were, society would always be alienated and I cannot see how it could become liberated.

This is why I propose to distinguish between two qualitatively different types of transition from one mode to another. When the transition is made unconsciously or by an alienated consciousness, that is, when the ideology animating classes does not allow them to master the process of change, the latter appears to be operating like a natural change, the ideology being part of nature. For this type of transition we can apply the expression “model of decadence.” In contrast, if and only if the ideology expresses the total and real dimension of the desired change, can we speak of revolution. 

Is the socialist revolution in which our era is engaged of the decadent or the revolutionary type? Doubtless we cannot as yet answer this question definitively. In certain aspects, the transformation of the modern world incontestably has a revolutionary character as defined above. The Paris Commune and the revolutions in Russia and China (and particularly the Cultural Revolution) have been moments of intense de-alienated social consciousness. But are we not engaged in another type of transition? The difficulties that make the disengagement of the imperialist countries nearly inconceivable today and the negative impact of this on the peripheral countries following the socialist road (leading to possible capitalist restoration, evolutions toward a statist mode, regression, nationalist alienation, etc.) call into question the old Bolshevik model.

Some people are resigned to this and believe that our time is not one of socialist transition but of worldwide expansion of capitalism which, starting from this “little corner of Europe,” is just beginning to extend to the south and the east. At the end of this transfer, the imperialist phase will appear to have been not the last, the highest stage of capitalism, but a transitional phase toward universal capitalism. And even if one continues to believe that the Leninist theory of imperialism is true and that national liberation is a part of the socialist and not of the bourgeois revolution, would not exceptions, that is, the appearance of new capitalist centers, be possible? This theory emphasizes the restorations or the evolutions toward a statist mode in the Eastern countries. It characterizes as objective processes of capitalist expansion what were only pseudo-socialist revolutions. Here Marxism appears as an alienating ideology masking the true character of these developments. 

Those who hold this opinion believe that we must wait until the level of development of the productive forces at the center is capable of spreading to the entire world before the question of the abolition of classes can really be put on the agenda. Europeans should thus allow the creation of a supranational Europe so that the state superstructure can be adjusted to the productive forces. It will doubtless be necessary to await the establishment of a planetary state corresponding to the level of the productive forces on the world scale, before the objective conditions for superseding it will obtain.

Others, myself among them, see things differently. The uninterrupted revolution by stages is still on the agenda for the periphery. Restorations in the course of the socialist transition are not irrevocable. And breaks in the imperialist front are not inconceivable in the weak links of the center.