Revolution is an open measurement of strength between social forces in a struggle for power. The State is not an end in itself. It is only a machine in the hands of the dominating social forces. Like every machine it has its motor, transmitting and executive mechanism. The driving force of the State is class interest; its motor mechanism is agitation, the press, church and school propaganda, parties, street meetings, petitions and revolts. The transmitting mechanism is the legislative organization of caste, dynastic, estate or class interests represented as the will of God (absolutism) or the will of the nation (parliamentarism). Finally, the executive mechanism is the administration, with its police, the courts, with their prisons, and the army.

The State is not an end in itself, but is a tremendous means for organizing, disorganizing and reorganizing social relations. It can be a powerful lever for revolution or a tool for organized stagnation, depending on the hands that control it.

Every political party worthy of the name strives to capture political power and thus place the State at the service of the class whose interests it expresses. The Social-Democrats, being the party of the proletariat, naturally strive for the political domination of the working class.

The proletariat grows and becomes stronger with the growth of capitalism. In this
sense the development of capitalism is also the development of the proletariat towards dictatorship. But the day and the hour when power will pass into the hands of the working class depends directly not upon the level attained by the productive forces but upon relations in the class struggle, upon the international situation, and, finally, upon a number of subjective factors: the traditions, the initiative and the readiness to fight of the workers.

It is possible for the workers to come to power in an economically backward country sooner than in an advanced country. In 1871 the workers deliberately took power in their hands in petty-bourgeois Paris – true, for only two months, but in the big-capitalist centres of Britain or the United States the workers have never held power for so much as an hour. To imagine that the dictatorship of the proletariat is in some way automatically dependent on the technical development and resources of a country is a prejudice of ‘economic’ materialism simplified to absurdity. This point of view has nothing in common with Marxism.

In our view, the Russian revolution will create conditions in which power can pass into the hands of the workers – and in the event of the victory of the revolution it must do so – before the politicians of bourgeois liberalism get the chance to display to the full their talent for governing.

Summing up the revolution and counter-revolution of 1848-49 in the American newspaper The Tribune, Marx wrote:

‘The working class in Germany is, in its social and political development, as far behind that of England and France as the German bourgeoisie is behind the bourgeoisie of those countries. Like master, like man. The evolution of the conditions of existence for a numerous, strong, concentrated and intelligent proletarian class goes hand in hand with the development of the conditions of existence for a numerous, wealthy, concentrated and powerful middle class. The working-class movement itself never is independent, never is of an exclusively proletarian character until all the different factions of the middle class, and particularly its most progressive faction, the large manufacturers, have conquered political power, and remodeled the State according to their wants. It is then that the inevitable conflict between the employer and the employed becomes imminent, and cannot be adjourned any longer ...’

This quotation is probably familiar to the reader, for it has been considerably abused by the textual Marxists in recent times. It has been brought forward as an irrefutable argument against the idea of a working class government in Russia. ‘Like master, like man.’ If the capitalist bourgeoisie is not strong enough to take power, they argue, then it is still less possible to establish a workers’ democracy, i.e., the political domination of the proletariat.

Marxism is above all a method of analysis – not analysis of texts, but analysis of social relations. Is it true that, in Russia, the weakness of capitalist liberalism inevitably means the weakness of the labour movement? Is it true, for Russia, that there cannot be an independent labour movement until the bourgeoisie has conquered power? It is
sufficient merely to put these questions to see what a hopeless formalism lies concealed beneath the attempt to convert an historically-relative remark of Marx’s into a supra-historical axiom.

During the period of the industrial boom, the development of factory industry in Russia bore an ‘American’ character; but in its actual dimensions capitalist industry in Russia is an infant compared with the industry of the United States. Five million persons – 16.6 per cent of the economically occupied population – are engaged in manufacturing industry in Russia; for the USA the corresponding figures would be six million and 22.2 per cent. These figures still tell us comparatively little, but they become eloquent if we recall that the population of Russia is nearly twice that of the USA. But in order to appreciate the actual dimensions of Russian and American industry it should be observed that in 1900 the American factories and large workshops turned out goods for sale to the amount of 25 milliard roubles, while in the same period the Russian factories turned out goods to the value of less than two and a half milliard roubles. [2]

There is no doubt that the numbers, the concentration, the culture and the political importance of the industrial proletariat depend on the extent to which capitalist industry is developed. But this dependence is not direct. Between the productive forces of a country and the political strength of its classes there cut across at any given moment various social and political factors of a national and international character, and these displace and even sometimes completely alter the political expression of economic relations. In spite of the fact that the productive forces of the United States are ten times as great as those of Russia, nevertheless the political role of the Russian proletariat, its influence on the politics of its own country and the possibility of its influencing the politics of the world in the near future are incomparably greater than in the case of the proletariat of the United States.

Kautsky, in his recent book on the American proletariat, points out that there is no direct relation between the political power of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, and the level of capitalist development on the other. ‘Two states exist’ he says, ‘diametrically contrasted one with the other. In one of them there is developed inordinately, i.e., out of proportion to the level of the development of the capitalist mode of production, one of the elements of the latter, and in the other, another of these elements. In one state – America – it is the capitalist class, while in Russia it is the proletariat. In no other country than America is there so much basis for speaking of the dictatorship of capital, while the militant proletariat has nowhere acquired such importance as in Russia. This importance must and undoubtedly will increase, because this country only recently began to take a part in the modern class struggle, and has only recently provided a certain amount of elbow room for it.’ Pointing out that Germany, to a certain extent, may learn its future from Russia, Kautsky continues: ‘It is indeed most extraordinary that the Russian proletariat should be showing us our future, in so far as this is expressed not in the extent of the development of capital, but in the protest of the working class. The fact that this Russia is the most backward of the
large states of the capitalist world would appear’, observes Kautsky, ‘to contradict the
materialist conception of history, according to which economic development is the basis
of political development; but really’, he goes on to say, ‘this only contradicts the
materialist conception of history as it is depicted by our opponents and critics, who
regard it not as a method of investigation but merely as a ready-made stereotype.’ [3]
We particularly recommend these lines to our Russian Marxists, who replace
independent analysis of social relations by deductions from texts, selected to serve
every occasion in life. Nobody compromises Marxism so much as these self-styled
Marxists.

Thus, according to Kautsky, Russia stands on an economically low level of capitalist
development, politically it has an insignificant capitalist bourgeoisie and a powerful
revolutionary proletariat. This results in the fact that ‘struggle for the interests of all
Russia has fallen to the lot of the only now-existing strong class in the country – the
industrial proletariat. For this reason the industrial proletariat has tremendous political
importance, and for this reason the struggle for the emancipation of Russia from the
incubus of absolutism which is stifling it has become converted into a single combat
between absolutism and the industrial proletariat, a single combat in which the
peasants may render considerable support but cannot play a leading role.

Does not all this give us reason to conclude that the Russian ‘man’ will take power
sooner than his ‘master’?

There can be two forms of political optimism. We can exaggerate our strength and
advantages in a revolutionary situation and undertake tasks which are not justified by
the given correlation of forces. On the other hand, we may optimistically set a limit to
our revolutionary tasks – beyond which, however, we shall inevitably be driven by the
logic of our position.

It is possible to limit the scope of all the questions of the revolution by asserting that
our revolution is bourgeois in its objective aims and therefore in its inevitable results,
closing our eyes to the fact that the chief actor in this bourgeois revolution is the
proletariat, which is being impelled towards power by the entire course of the
revolution.

We may reassure ourselves that in the framework of a bourgeois revolution the
political domination of the proletariat will only be a passing episode, forgetting that
once the proletariat has taken power in its hands it will not give it up without a
desperate resistance, until it is torn from its hands by armed force.

We may reassure ourselves that the social conditions of Russia are still not ripe for a
socialist economy, without considering that the proletariat, on taking power, must, by
the very logic of its position, inevitably be urged toward the introduction of state
management of industry. The general sociological term bourgeois revolution by no
means solves the politico-tactical problems, contradictions and difficulties which the mechanics of a given bourgeois revolution throw up.

Within the framework of the bourgeois revolution at the end of the eighteenth century, the objective task of which was to establish the domination of capital, the dictatorship of the sansculottes was found to be possible. This dictatorship was not simply a passing episode, it left its impress upon the entire ensuing century, and this in spite of the fact that it was very quickly shattered against the enclosing barriers of the bourgeois revolution. In the revolution at the beginning of the twentieth century, the direct objective tasks of which are also bourgeois, there emerges as a near prospect the inevitable, or at least the probable, political domination of the proletariat. The proletariat itself will see to it that this domination does not become a mere passing ‘episode’, as some realist philistines hope. But we can even now ask ourselves: is it inevitable that the proletarian dictatorship should be shattered against the barriers of the bourgeois revolution, or is it possible that in the given world-historical conditions, it may discover before it the prospect of victory on breaking through these barriers? Here we are confronted by questions of tactics: should we consciously work towards a working-class government in proportion as the development of the revolution brings this stage nearer, or must we at that moment regard political power as a misfortune which the bourgeois revolution is ready to thrust upon the workers, and which it would be better to avoid?

Ought we to apply to ourselves the words of the ‘realist’ politician Vollmar in connection with the Communards of 1871: ‘Instead of taking power they would have done better to go to sleep’...

Notes

   [i.e. Germany: Revolution and Counter-Revolution, Ch.1; Selected Works of Karl Marx, 1942 edition, Vol.II, p.46.]

2. D. Mendeleyev, Towards the Understanding of Russia, 1906, p.99. – L.T.

3. K. Kautsky, American and Russian Workers, Russian translation, St. Petersburg 1906, pp.4 and 5. – L.T.