Marxism and the political economy of Paul Sweezy

Part 7: The socialist revolution

Nick Beams
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PART 1 | PART 2 | PART 3 | PART 4 | PART 5 | PART 6 | PART 7

This is the final part of a series of articles by Nick Beams, a member of the International Editorial Board of the World Socialist Web Site, *dealing with the life and work of radical political economist Paul Sweezy, founder-editor of the* Monthly Review, *who died in Larchmont, New York on February 27, 2004. The first four parts of the seven-part series were published from April 6-9. Parts 5 & 6 were published on April 12 & 13.*

Following the publication of *Monopoly Capital*, which was to enjoy a wide readership in the growing protest movements, Sweezy took his conception of the non-revolutionary role of the working class a step further. In a lecture delivered to the Third Annual Socialist Scholars Conference in September 1967, he insisted that his analysis corresponded to that of Marx.

According to Sweezy, before the introduction of machinery into the processes of capitalist production (described by Marx as "manu-" as opposed to "machino-"facture) the working class had been dominated by conservative craft traditions. It was only when these traditions were broken down by the introduction of machinery that the working class became a revolutionary force. This lasted, however, only for a limited period of time.

"If the revolutionary opportunities of the early period of modern industry are missed [as they had been in Western Europe, although not in Russia—NB], the proletariat of an industrialised country tends to become less and less revolutionary. This does not mean, however, that Marx's contention that capitalism produces its own gravediggers is wrong. If we consider capitalism as a global system, which is the only correct procedure, we see that it is divided into a handful of exploiting countries and a much more numerous and populous group of exploited countries. The masses in these exploited dependencies constitute a force in the global capitalist system which is revolutionary in the same sense and for the same reasons that Marx considered the proletariat of the early period of modern industry. And finally, world history since the Second World War proves that this revolutionary force is really capable of waging successful revolutionary struggles against capitalist domination." [29]

In yet another historical irony, these lines were written just eight months before the eruption of the May-June events in France, the largest and most explosive movement of the working class since the 1930s. The French general strike was followed by a series of upheavals in the major capitalist countries, from the 1969 hot autumn in Italy, to the miners' strikes in Britain, and the Portuguese revolution in 1975.

The events in France dealt a shattering blow to all the bourgeois theories of the 1950s and 1960s about the "end of ideology" and the disappearance of class struggle. But they did not shift Sweezy. Writing in 1972, he continued to insist that the "principal contradiction" of the post-war epoch was not between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but between "the metropolis dominated by the United States and revolutionary national liberation movements in the Third World."

Marx's expectations had not been fulfilled because "technological and structural changes in the advanced capitalist countries have turned what was a revolutionary proletariat at the height of the industrial revolution into a much more variegated and predominantly non-revolutionary proletariat in the period of developed monopoly capitalism." At the same time, Sweezy continued, "developments on a world scale have seen the exploited masses in the Third World gradually transformed into a revolutionary force capable (as China and Vietnam have proved) of challenging and defeating the technologically most advanced capitalist nations." [30]

There is no question that, since the 1930s, vast changes had taken place in the capitalist economy. And, as Sweezy wrote these lines, even bigger ones were to follow. From the 1970s on, the industrial working class in the advanced capitalist economies declined both in relative and absolute terms. But this has not resulted in its "disappearance." In fact, the composition of the working class is always changing, as a result of the continuous revolutionizing of the process of production—the central characteristic of the capitalist mode of production. The working class encountered by Marx in Paris in the late 1840s was to "disappear" over the next decades as new industrial processes developed. Likewise, the changes resulting from assembly-line production and the rise of the giant corporation in the first half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of whole new categories of workers. Today, under the impact of computerisation and information technology, this process is being repeated.

The expansion of the proletariat

Sweezy's assessment of the historical role of the working class was based on a completely one-sided appraisal of the changes in the structure of capitalist economy.

The working class, or proletariat, is not defined by the type of labour it performs, but by its relationship to the means of production. As Engels explained in a footnote to the 1888 English edition of the Communist Manifesto: "By proletariat [is meant], the class of modern wage-labourers, who, having no means of production of their own, are reduced to selling their labour-power in order to live."

Taking this definition as the starting point, it is clear that far from becoming a minority, the proletariat now comprises the overwhelming majority of the population in all the advanced capitalist countries. The

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class which is “disappearing” is the old middle class—small proprietors, small farmers—who were able, in the past, to maintain a certain degree of independence.

Of course, Engels’ definition by no means exhausts the question. But it does establish that class is a *social relationship*, and that the class of proletarians comprises the vast bulk of the wage-earning population, forced to sell its labour power in order to live.

Sweezy’s conclusions were influenced, to a great extent, by the rise of what used to be called the new middle classes, employed by the major industrial and financial corporations. In the period of the 1950s and 1960s, when profit rates were stationary or even rising, these classes were, despite their essentially proletarian character, able to obtain certain limited gains and concessions. Moreover, Sweezy’s theory of the ever-rising surplus seemed to guarantee the continuation of these concessions in perpetuity, given that the new middle classes were engaged in sales, insurance, marketing, and state-run services—all activities that involved an absorption of the surplus.

The re-emergence of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, however, and the intense competitive struggle that it has induced among giant corporations, have led to ever-increasing attacks on these “white collar” sections of the workforce. For a certain historical period, due to powerful, but nonetheless transitory, conditions, the essential proletarian character of these social layers was obscured. But now the limited concessions they once enjoyed have been removed. They are being treated as what they actually are—wage-labourers to be hired and fired, downsized and speeded up, in the interests of the profit system. And this life experience is what lies behind the growing anti-corporate sentiment of wide layers of the population in all the major capitalist countries—above all, in the United States.

The demise of the national liberation struggles

Just as Sweezy’s thesis of the non-revolutionary role of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries was based on temporary historical factors, so too was his glorification of the national liberation struggles in the Third World, and their Stalinist and Maoist leaderships.

The overthrow of imperialist domination will certainly play an enormous role in the struggle for socialism. But the history of the past three decades has proved conclusively the truth of Trotsky’s analysis that “only the conquest of power by the world proletariat can assure a real and lasting freedom of development for all nations of our planet.” [31]

In May 1975, the national liberation struggles achieved their crowning success with the military defeat of the US in Vietnam. But vast changes in the political economy of world capitalism were already at work. The limited gains made by the national liberation movements were based on two conjunctural factors: the post-war economic boom and the existence of the Soviet Union as a counterweight to US imperialism.

Just fifteen years after the victory in Vietnam the situation had already been transformed. The post-war boom had well and truly come to an end and the Soviet Union had collapsed. As a result, the one-time leaders of the national liberation struggles, above all of the Chinese Communist Party, were opening the way for the free market and competing for foreign investment. In Vietnam, the US military had been defeated. But, in the final analysis, imperialist finance capital proved to be an even more powerful enemy.

The demise of the national liberation movements—and their transformation into nothing more than the petty agents of world capitalism—has not weakened the prospects for international socialism. On the contrary, the very processes that have brought about their demise—above all, the globalisation of capitalist production—have vastly expanded the world working class and seen its emergence in regions of the world where it previously barely existed. This is not just a quantitative, but a qualitative change. The global character of capitalist production and finance itself has created the conditions for the unification of the working class at a level never before possible.

To carry this through, the workers’ movement must be re-armed with an historical perspective, grounded on all the strategic lessons of the twentieth century. Here we come to one final, central issue in the political biography of Paul Sweezy: his attitude to the Trotskyist movement.

Sweezy and Leon Trotsky

Given the significant role played by Trotsky’s writings in his own political evolution, it is remarkable that Sweezy never elaborated his position on Trotsky’s struggle against Stalinism, in particular, his struggle against the Stalinist doctrine of “socialism in one country.” Trotsky’s *History of the Russian Revolution*, which Sweezy acknowledged powerfully influenced him, was published at the height of this conflict. Moreover, Sweezy cannot have been unaware of Trotsky’s devastating critique of the policies of Stalin, the Comintern and the Communist Party of Germany, which opened the way for Hitler to come to power in January 1933.

When discussing his own political evolution, Sweezy slid over these issues. In 1987, he was asked in an interview why he never joined a political party during the radicalisation of the 1960s. Sweezy replied that he saw his role as “trying to maintain certain radical traditions, a certain sense of history, which could not be done in any of the available existing party formations, sectarian formations. And so we tried to produce something which would be useful to all of them, if they wanted to place themselves in the historical development. And really the only serious political party was the Communist Party, plus the Trotskyists, who are a variant of the Communist Party; the parties that came out of the Third International. And they were absolutely impossible from the point of view of any intellectual creativity.” [32]

Sweezy’s description of the Trotskyist movement as a “variant” of the Communist Party was dishonest, to say the least, and typical of the ex-Stalinists and those influenced by Stalinism. He knew very well that the Fourth International had been established in a bitter struggle against the theories and practices of Stalinism—a struggle involving not only the fate of the Russian Revolution, but the entire socialist project. Any Marxist concerned with the establishment of historical truth was obliged to make an assessment of the conflict over fundamental questions of perspective that had erupted in the Russian Communist Party, and which were to lead to the founding of the Fourth International.

Such an analysis was necessitated by the nature of the socialist revolution itself. As Marx had explained, whereas the bourgeois revolutions of the eighteenth century had stormed quickly from success to success, “proletarian revolutions, like those of the nineteenth century, criticise themselves constantly, interrupt themselves continually in their own course, come back to the apparently accomplished in order to begin it afresh, deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltriness of their first attempts, seem to throw down their adversary only in order that he may draw new strength from the earth and rise again, more gigantic before them, recoil ever and anon from the indefinite prodigiousness of their own aims, until a situation has been created which makes all turning back impossible ...” [33]

How much more applicable were these remarks to the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. Sweezy’s silence on these great issues

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reflected, in the final analysis, a deep-seated scepticism about socialist revolution. And this scepticism was reflected, in turn, in his political economy.

When Sweezy did, eventually, write on Trotsky's theoretical legacy in 1978 he did so without any serious examination of the central issues. In a *Monthly Review* article on the class nature of the Soviet Union, he argued that a "new type" of ruling class existed there. While Trotsky's thesis that the Stalinist bureaucracy was a parasitic caste—and not a new ruling class—was "attractive", it had failed the test of time. The longer the bureaucracy continued to rule "the less convincing is the Trotskyist theory of its essential nature."

It would be "absurd", he insisted, to maintain that the regime was in danger. "Both economically and militarily the Soviet Union has grown in strength, and the regime's capacity to control this increasing power and use it in its own interest has never been less open to question." [34]

These lines were written when the Soviet Union was entering its terminal crisis. Just seven years later, Gorbachev was elevated to power as the bureaucracy sought to secure its social position by restoring the capitalist system. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union had been liquidated. Once again, Sweezy had based himself on the seeming permanence of a transitory situation, right at the point where it was about to undergo a dramatic change.

All the theories of a "new ruling class" were put to the test in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Following almost exactly the course anticipated by Trotsky more than half a century before, the Stalinist bureaucracy set about completing the counter-revolution that had begun in the 1920s.

"A collapse of the Soviet regime," Trotsky wrote, "would lead inevitably to the collapse of the planned economy, and thus the abolition of state property. The bond of compulsion between the trusts and the factories within them would fall away. The more successful enterprises would succeed in coming out on the road of independence. They might convert themselves into stock companies, or they might find some other transitional form of property—one, for example, in which the workers should participate in the profits. The collective farms would disintegrate at the same time, and far more easily. The fall of the present bureaucratic dictatorship, if it were not replaced by a new socialist power, would thus mean a return to capitalist relations with a catastrophic decline of the economy and culture." [35]

We have undertaken this extensive review of Sweezy's theoretical work because the issues on which he wrote, particularly in the sphere of political economy, remain decisive today. Is the capitalist system characterised by an ever-expanding surplus? Or are there irresolvable contradictions, rooted in the accumulation process itself, which, at a certain point, assume such violence that the very future of civilisation is threatened?

Was the revolutionary role of the working class merely a passing phase of capitalist development in the nineteenth century? Or is the working class—comprising, for the first time in history, the majority of the world's population—now called upon to find a way out of the historical impasse into which capitalism has driven mankind?

The development of an international socialist movement capable of politically re-arming the working class will take place, above all, through an assimilation of all the great strategic experiences of the twentieth century, which are embodied in the history and program of the Trotskyist movement.

Concluded.

Notes:

29. Paul Sweezy Marx and the Proletariat in *Modern Capitalism and Other Essays* Monthly Review Press, New York 1972
30. Sweezy op cit p. vi
31. Leon Trotsky, War and the Fourth International in *Writings* 1933-34 Pathfinder Press, New York 1972 p. 306
32. Interview with Paul Sweezy op cit
33. Marx, *TheEighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* in Marx and Engels, Selected Works Volume 1 Progress Publishers, Moscow 1969 p. 401
34. Paul Sweezy, Is There a Ruling Class in the USSR? *Monthly Review* October 1978
35. Leon Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed* Labor Publications, Detroit 1991 pp. 212-213

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