

STALIN AS A THEORETICIAN

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Ground Rent, or, Stalin Deepens Marx and Engels

In the beginning of his struggle against the "general secretary," Bucharin declared in some connection that Stalin's chief ambition is to compel his recognition as a "theoretician." Bucharin knows Stalin well enough, on the one hand, and the A B C of Communism, on the other, to understand the whole tragedy of this pretension. It was in the role of a theoretician that Stalin appeared at the conference of the Marxian agronomists. Among other things, ground rent did not come out unscathed.

Only very recently (1925) Stalin judged that it was necessary to strengthen the peasant holdings for scores of years, that is, the actual and juridical liquidation of the nationalization of the land. The People's Commissar of Agriculture of Georgia, not without the knowledge of Stalin, it is understood, at that time introduced a legislative project for the direct abolition of the nationalization. The Russian Commissar of Agriculture worked in the same spirit. The Opposition sounded the alarm. In its platform, it wrote: "The Party must give a crushing rebuff to all the tendencies directed towards the abolition or undermining of the nationalization of land, one of the pillars of the dictatorship of the proletariat." Just as in 1922 Stalin had to give up his attempts on the monopoly of foreign trade, in 1926 he had to give up the attempt on the nationalization of land, declaring that "he was not correctly understood."

After the proclamation of the Left course, Stalin not only became the defender of the nationalization of land, but he immediately accused the Opposition of not understanding the significance of this whole institution. Yesterday's nihilism towards nationalization was immediately converted into a fetishism. Marx's theory of ground rent was given a new administrative task: To justify Stalin's complete collectivization.

Here we must make a brief reference to theory. In his unfinished analysis on ground rent, Marx divides it into **absolute** and **differential**. Since the same human labor applied to different sections of the land yields different results, the surplus yield of the more fertile section will naturally be retained by the owner of the land. This is **differential** rent. But not one of the owners will give to a tenant free of charge even the worst section as long as there is a demand for it. In other words, from private ownership of land necessarily flows a certain minimum of ground rent, independent of the quality of the soil. This is what is called **absolute** rent. In conformity with this theory, the liquidation of private ownership of land leads to the liquidation of absolute ground rent. Only that rent remains which is determined by the quality of the land itself, or, to state it more correctly, by the application of human labor to land of different quality. There is no need to elucidate that differential rent is not a relationship fixed by the section itself, but changes with the method of exploiting the land. These brief reminders are needed by us in order to reveal the whole paltriness of Stalin's excursion into the realm of the theory of the nationalization of land.

Stalin begins by correcting and deepening Engels. This is not the first time with him. In 1926, Stalin explained to us that to Engels as well as to Marx the A B C law of the unequal development of capitalism was unknown, and precisely because of this they both rejected the theory of socialism in one country which, in opposition to them, was defended by Vollmar, the theoretical forerunner of Stalin.

The question of the nationalization of the land, more correctly, the insufficient understanding of this problem by the old man Engels, is apparently approached by Stalin with greater caution. But in reality — just as lightly. He quotes from Engels' work on the peasant question the famous phrase that we will in no way violate the will of the small peasant; on the contrary, we will in every way help him "in order to facilitate his transition into associations," that is, to collectivized agriculture. "We will try to give him as much time as possible to consider it on his own piece of land." These excellent words, known to every literate Marxist, give a

clear and simple formula for the relation of the proletariat to the peasantry.

Confronted with the necessity of justifying complete collectivization on a frenzied scale, Stalin underlines the exceptional, the even, "at first glance, exaggerated" caution of Engels with regard to conducting the small peasant on the road of socialist agricultural economy. What was Engels guided by in his "exaggerated" caution? Stalin replies thus: "It is evident that his point of departure was the existence of private ownership of land, the fact that the peasant has his piece of land from which he, the peasant, will be parted with difficulty. Such is the peasantry in **capitalist countries**, where private ownership in land exists. It is understood that here (?) great caution is needed. Can it be said that here in the U. S. S. R. there is such a situation? No, it cannot be said. It cannot, because we have no private ownership of land which binds the peasant to his individual economy." Such are Stalin's observations. Can it be said that in these observations there is even a grain of sense? No, it cannot be said. Engels, it appears, had to be "cautious" because in the **bourgeois** countries private ownership of land exists. But Stalin needs no caution because we have established the nationalization of land. But did there not exist in bourgeois Russia private ownership of land alongside of the more archaic communal ownership? We did not acquire the nationalization of land ready made, we established it after the seizure of power. But Engels speaks about the policy the proletarian party will put into effect precisely after the seizure of power. What sense is there to Stalin's condescending explanation of Engels' indecision: The old man had to act in bourgeois countries where private ownership of land exists, while we were wise enough to abolish private ownership. But Engels recommends caution precisely after the seizure of power by the proletariat, consequently, after the abolition of private ownership of the means of production.

By contrasting the Soviet peasant policy with Engels' advice, Stalin confuses the question in the most ridiculous manner. Engels promised to give the small peasant time to think on his own piece of land before he decides to enter the collective. In this transitional period of the peasant's "deliberations," the workers' state, according to Engels, must separate the small peasant from the usurers, the tradesmen, etc., that is, to limit the exploiting tendencies of the Kulak. The Soviet policy in relation to the main, that is, the non-exploiting, mass of all the peasantry, had precisely this dual character in spite of all its vacillations. In spite of all the statistical clatterings the collectivization movement is now, in the thirteenth year of the seizure of power, really going through the first stages. To the overwhelming mass of the peasants, the dictatorship of the proletariat has thus given twelve years for deliberation. It is doubtful if Engels had in mind such a long period, and it is doubtful if such a long period will be needed in the advanced countries of the West where, with the high development of industry, it will be incomparably easier for the proletariat to prove to the peasant by deed all the advantages of collective agriculture. If we, only twelve years after the seizure of power by the proletariat, begin a wide movement, so far very primitive in content, and very unstable, towards collectivization, it is to be explained only by our poverty and backwardness, in spite of the fact that we have the land nationalized, which Engels presumably did not think of, or which the Western proletariat will presumably be unable to establish after the seizure of power. In this contrasting of Russia with the West, and at the same Stalin with Engels, the idolization of the national backwardness is glaringly apparent.

But Stalin does not stop at this. He immediately supplements economic incoherence with theoretical. "Why," he asks his unfortunate auditors, "do we succeed so easily (!!) in demonstrating, under the condition of nationalized land the superiority (of collectives) over the small peasant economies? This is where the tremendous revolutionary significance of the Soviet agrarian laws lies, which abolished absolute rent . . . and which established the nationalization of land." And Stalin self-contentedly, and at

the same time, reproachfully, asks: "Why is not this new (!?) argument utilized sufficiently by our agrarian theoreticians in their struggle against every bourgeois theory?" And here Stalin makes reference—the Marxian agronomists are recommended not to exchange glances, nor to blow their noses in confusion, and what is more, not to hide their heads under the table—to the third volume of "Capital" and to Marx's theory of ground rent. What heights did this theoretician have to ascend before plunging into the mire with his "new argument." According to Stalin, it would appear that the Western peasant is tied down to the land by nothing else than "absolute rent." And since we "destroyed" this monster, that in itself caused to disappear the mighty "power of the land" over the peasant, so grippingly depicted by Gleb Ouspensky, and by Balzac and Zola in France.

In the very first place, let us establish that **absolute rent was not abolished by us, but was nationalized, which is not one and the same thing.** Newmark valued the national wealth of Russia in 1914 at 140,000,000,000 gold rubles, including in the first place the price of all the land, that is, the capitalized rent of the whole country. If we should want to establish now the specific gravity of the natural wealth of the Soviet Union within the wealth of humanity, we would of course have to include the capitalized rent, differential as well as absolute.

All economic criteria, absolute rent included, are reduced to human labor. Under the conditions of market economy, rent is determined by that quantity of products which can be extracted by the owner of the land from the products of the labor applied to it. The owner of the land in the U. S. S. R. is the state. By that itself it is the bearer of the ground rent. As to the actual liquidation of absolute rent, we will be able to speak of that only after the socialization of the land all over our planet, that is, after the victory of the world revolution. But within national limits, if one man say so without insulting Stalin, not only socialism can not be constructed, but even absolute rent cannot be abolished.

This interesting theoretical question has a practical significance. Ground rent finds its expression on the world market in the price of agriculture products. Insofar as the Soviet government is an exporter of the latter—and with the intensification of agriculture grain exports will increase greatly—to that extent, armed with the monopoly of foreign trade, the Soviet government appears on the world market as the owner of the land whose product it exports, and consequently, in the price of these products the Soviet government realizes the ground rent concentrated in its hands. If the technique of our agriculture were not inferior to that of the capitalists, and at the same time the technique of our foreign trade, then precisely with us in the U. S. S. R. absolute rent would appear in its clearest and most concentrated form. This moment will have to acquire the greatest significance in the future under the planned direction of agriculture and export. If Stalin now brags of our "abolition" of absolute rent, instead of realizing it on the world market, then a temporary right to such bragging is given him by the present weakness of our agricultural export and the irrational character of our foreign trade, in which not only is absolute ground rent sunk without a trace, but many other things as well. This side of the matter, which has no direct relation to the collectivization of peasant economy, nevertheless shows us by one more example that the idolization of economic isolation and economic backwardness is one of the basic features of our national-socialist philosopher.

Let us return to the question of collectivization. According to Stalin it would appear that the Western peasant is attached to his piece of land by the tie of absolute rent. Every peasant's hen will laugh at his "new argument." Absolute rent is a purely capitalist category. Dispersed peasant economy can have a taste of absolute rent only under episodic circumstances of an exceptionally favorable market conjuncture, as existed, for instance, at the beginning of the war. The economic dictatorship of finance capital over the diffused village is expressed on the market in unequal exchange. The pea-

santry generally does not issue out of the universal "scissors" regime. In the prices of grain and agricultural products in general, the overwhelming mass of the small peasantry does not realize the labor power, let along the rent.

But if absolute rent, which Stalin so triumphantly "abolished," says decidedly nothing to the brain or heart of the small peasant, then differential rent, which Stalin so generously spared, has a great significance, precisely for the Western peasant. The tenant farmer holds on to his piece of land all the stronger the more he and his father spent strength and means to raise its fertility. This applies, by the way, and not only to the West but to the East, for instance, to China with its districts of intensified cultivation. Certain elements of the petty conservation of private ownership are inherent here, consequently, not in an abstract category of absolute rent, but in the material conditions of a higher parcelized culture. If it is comparatively easy to break the Russian peasants away from a piece of land, it is not at all because Stalin's "new argument" liberated them from absolute rent but for the very reason for which, prior to the October revolution, periodic repartition of land took place in Russia. Our Narodniki idolized these repartitions as such. Nevertheless, they were only possible because of our non-intensive economy, the three-field system, the miserable tilling of the soil, that is, once again, because of the backwardness idolized by Stalin.

Will it be more difficult for the victorious proletariat of the West to eliminate peasant conservation which flows from the greater cultivation of small holdings? By no means. For there, because of the incomparably higher state of industry and culture in general, the proletarian state will more easily be enabled to give the peasant entering collective farms an evident and genuine compensation for his loss of the "differential rent" on his piece of land. There can be no doubt that twelve years after the seizure of power the collectivization of agriculture in Germany, England or America will be immeasurably higher and firmer than ours.

Is it not strange that his "new argument" in favor of complete collectivization was discovered by Stalin twelve years after nationalization had taken place? Then why did he, in spite of the existence of nationalization in 1923-1928 so stubbornly rely upon the powerful individual producer and not upon the collectives? It is clear: Nationalization of the land is a necessary condition for socialist agriculture but it is altogether insufficient. From the narrow economic point of view, that is, the one from which Stalin tackles the question, the nationalization of land is precisely of third rate significance, because the cost of inventory required for rational, large scale economy exceeds manifold the absolute rent.

Needless to say that nationalization of land is a necessary and most important political and juridical pre-condition for socialist reconstruction of agriculture. But the direct economic significance of nationalization at any given moment is determined by the action of factors of a material-productive character.

(To Be Continued)

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