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Commodity-money relations in the socialist transformation of labour

ABSTRACT

The issue of commodity-money relations is crucial for the understanding of the peculiarities and contradictions of the socialist transformation of labour, both in the 20th century socialist countries and, mutatis mutandis, in potential socialist endeavours of the 21st century.

Marx and Engels were not in a position, nor did they ever attempt, to make an extensive reference to the characteristics of a future communist society and the processes of its construction. Consequently, they left no coherent theory on the process of transcending commodity-money relations. However, in some fragmentary statements on this issue, they seem to overestimate the possibilities offered by the mechanization of the means of production in the form of large industry for the abolition of commodity-money relations already in the lower phase of communist society.

The doctrinal perception of these statements by the leaders of the first socialist revolutions had a negative impact on the efforts to change property relations.

Generally, in the first socialist societies, the dominant attitude toward commodity-money relations moved roughly along two extreme axes: a. toward their theoretical rejection or denigration and their excessive shrinkage and suppression in economy, which was inconsistent with the material conditions in these societies; b. toward their theoretical idealization and wide spread in the relations of production, which led to the collapse of the socialist regimes.

It should be noted that the failure of the first socialist societies to achieve the transcendence of commodity-money relations or, more precisely, the stable process of their transformation was one of the most crucial (if not the most crucial) factors that contributed to their defeat.

If we consider a possible new attempt for the socialist transformation of labour in contemporary conditions, I believe that it would be distinguished by the inevitable coexistence and contradictory interaction between communist-planning relations, on the one hand, and commodity-money relations, on the other. Communist-planning relations, and the subsequent social ownership of the means of production, should evidently prevail. The very development of a communist society primarily presupposes the gradual transcendence of commodity-money relations.

Given the above, I believe that the future of commodity-money relations, their preservation (the degree of their preservation) and, correspondingly, the extent of their transcendence in a potential new attempt for a socialist transformation of labour will be determined decisively by the following factors:

1. By the means and objects of production, the extent to which their use mostly requires individual activity or the activity of a limited group of people, and therefore, the improvement of production depends mainly on individual or group efforts. By the extent to which manual labour in mechanized production is preserved in relation to the level and

possibilities of its automation, including the automation of the monitoring and control of production processes. Also, by the level of the social transformation and control of conditions of production (soil-climatic factors, etc). Consequently, by the degree to which it is possible to plan production processes with precision and secure the high predictability of their results, as to their qualitative and quantitative dimensions.

2. By the character of labour activity, its adverse or beneficial effect on workers; by the degree of preserving executive, tiring, monotonous and unhealthy labour, which destroys the physical and intellectual powers of the worker and, correspondingly, the extent to which labour is related to the managerial, scientific, intellectual, creative and pleasant activity, which has a positive contribution to the personality development of the worker. By the degree to which labour under external and coercive incentives has been replaced by labour as an end in itself, for the sake of satisfying an inner need for labour.

3. By the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of the social product which is intended for individual consumption. By the ability of society (the extent of this ability, as it is manifested in the remuneration in each unit and sector of production) to produce and offer workers goods that best meet the qualitative and quantitative dimensions of their individual needs. By the degree to which the possibility for customized production of consumer goods is secured, in relation to the automation of communication-interaction between producers and consumers.

4. By the dominant type of worker, its capacities, knowledge, and abilities to control the production process. This is the degree (in the scale of different units and sectors of production) to which the worker-bearer of physical power, empirical or elementary scientific knowledge has been replaced by the worker-bearer of comprehensively developed intellectual, cultural powers, capable not only of using but also of creating scientific knowledge, and having a deep perception of production processes.