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12 Principles of the Marxist Approach to Social Structure and Social Mobility

M. N. RUTKEVICH AND F. R. FILIPPOV

There is no doubt that only Marxist dialectics and the materialist conception of history can provide a genuinely scientific basis for understanding the social structure of any society and all the processes of its change, including social mobility* (as noted above, we are using the concept of social structure in its narrow sense, as social-class structure). On these questions materialist dialectics and the Marxist theory of classes stand in opposition to structuralism as a trend in current bourgeois philosophical thought, and to the theory of social stratification in sociology referred to above. The essential differences between Marxism and these conceptions can be formulated as follows.

First, Marxist sociology, in full conformity with dialectics, requires that we examine any society not abstractly, unhistorically,

From M. N. Rutkevich and F. R. Filippov, Sotsial'nye peremeshcheniia, "Mysl'" Publishing House, Moscow, 1970, pp. 33-47.

*Rutkevich and Filippov use the term sotsial'nye peremeshcheniia ("social shifts from position to position") to refer to cases in which the unit of mobility is individuals, and they argue that the term "social mobility" should be restricted to cases in which the unit of mobility is the whole society. Since the former type of mobility is conventionally referred to as "social mobility" in Western and much of Soviet sociological literature, we have translated sotsial'nye peremeshcheniia as "social mobility" in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

but as a historically evolved, qualitatively definite type of society. Lenin emphasized that "social organisms are just as profoundly different from one another as animal organisms are from plants." (1) This does not mean, of course, that there are no general laws of history. Marxist dialectics proceeds from the unity of the general and the particular. Just as biology reveals certain general laws of life, sociology must discover general laws of social development operating at all stages of historical progress among all the people of the earth. But the social structure of every social order is distinct from the preceding and following ones, and thus its specific features must be revealed. Therefore, the attempts of the adherents of "social stratification" to divide every society into the same layers ("strata") independently of the prevailing socio-economic order cannot be regarded as scientific. With respect to the modern epoch this means that the social-class structures of capitalist and socialist societies are fundamentally different, and thus all arguments concerning their "increasing similarity," "convergence," and the like, must be rejected. The processes of social mobility under capitalism and socialism must be examined with due regard for the fundamental differences in the social structure of the two social systems, one of which embodies the past while the other embodies the future of mankind.

Second, in analyzing social structure, scientific sociology bases itself on the materialist conception of social life. Lenin wrote that a basic idea of Marx and Engels "was that social relations are divided into material and ideological relations. The latter represent only a superstructure relative to the former, which are formed apart from the will and consciousness of human beings. . . ." (2) Therefore, in studying the division of society into social groups, the foundation of this division must be sought in differences in their economic position. The Marxist theory of classes is based on the materialist conception of the development of society as an objective or, in Marx's expression, natural-historical process.

In contrast to this, the prevailing notion in current bourgeois sociology is that the position of individuals is determined by a "status hierarchy," and that this depends on the "scale of values"

in the given society. (3) Viewing these "values," particularly prestige, as criteria of "social status," bourgeois sociologists derive the social division of society from manifestations of consciousness, public opinion, etc.

Along with the concept of status there is introduced the concept of social roles, which are varied and in their totality determine the position of the individual in society. The "social role" of the individual is essentially his function in society, and in this respect, therefore, the argument contains an element of truth. But, in the first place, bourgeois sociologists treat "social role" subjectively, divorcing it from objective social position and the functions associated with it, and second, in studying the multiplicity of "roles," the principal role (function) is either not distinguished at all or is distinguished arbitrarily. This reflects the eclecticism and subjectivism of "role theory." In reality, among the variety of functions (roles) there exists a basic one, determined by the objective position of the individual (and the groups of which he is a member) in the system of economic relations. Marxist sociology views the social structure, first and foremost, as a structure of objective economic relations in society. The main differences in position in the system of economic relations are essentially differences between social classes, and class composition and class relations determine the principal features of the social structure of society, and thus the functions of groups and the individuals in them, as well as the totality of "roles" belonging to them.

Third, in elucidating the social structure, Marxism and bourgeois sociology also have a different approach to economic characteristics. This is particularly important to consider, since along with such features of social division as prestige, power, and education, the works of bourgeois sociologists and economists assign a role to such objective economic features as income level and occupation. The eclecticism inherent in bourgeois sociology is manifest in the fact that all these features (and frequently many others — for example, religion, ethnic background, etc.) are examined in "parallel," without elucidating their internal connection. If the interconnection between any two factors is examined, for example, income and

education, it is done in purely empirical terms.

However, despite methodological defects, the analyses by bourgeois researchers of the distribution of the employed population according to income levels, or of the relationship between parents' occupations and the educational level of children, etc., have some cognitive value and, with the appropriate critical approach, can be utilized by Marxists.

Only the Marxist theory of classes can provide a genuine foundation for empirical investigation of social structure and social mobility. The economic features pointed to by adherents of "social stratification," such as income level and type of employment (occupation), must be placed within the framework of the system of social production. Thus, when heads of families with annual incomes of \$5,000 to \$10,000 in the USA are combined within a single "stratum," the source of income remains concealed. However, this amount of annual income can be received either in the form of wages by hired workers or as the income of a small merchant or farmer. Similarly, when American statistics (and the sociologists and economists who use them) include all individuals employed in mental work in the category of "white-collar workers," the difference between the low-level employees of firms and their managers is obliterated. It is enough to glance at any statistical handbook published in the USA to become convinced that it includes "managers" and "proprietors" among "white-collar workers," along with "sales workers." (4)

As an example we may cite the book by G. Kolko, Wealth and Power in America. Promising the reader to reveal "the outlines of the actual American class structure that emerge from the inequalities of income, wealth, and economic power," Kolko states that in characterizing "class" one must also consider cultural, racial, and other factors. In many studies, he asserts, the latter "overshadow" the economic basis of class, which is usually ignored. This is "a distortion I shall endeavor to correct," he writes. (5) But when Kolko moves on to concrete analysis of the "economic features" of what he calls a "class," he concentrates his attention chiefly on the amount of income, not on its source and the form in which it is received. The income

intervals presented are so wide that the same "class" includes both the employer and the skilled worker hired by this employer. In depicting the economic basis of "class," everything is thrown in: possession of a Cadillac, an account at a restaurant, membership dues in a club, etc. Despite the superficially scientific nature of his terminology and his attention to economics, Kolkov's "classes" are essentially the familiar "strata." At the same time, his book contains considerable material that can be used to illustrate genuine class inequality in contemporary American society.

Therefore, the use of objective economic characteristics as criteria of social divisions is, in itself, not sufficient. When Marxist sociology elucidates social structure, it proceeds from the proposition that material production is the essence of economic activity, and that the objective differences between groups of people in the system of production relations are embodied in the existence of classes.

As we know, the fullest definition of classes, and the one generally accepted in current Marxist literature, was formulated by Lenin in 1919. "Classes are large groups of people which differ from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organization of labor, and, consequently, by the dimensions and method of acquiring the share of social wealth of which they dispose. Classes are groups of people, one of which can appropriate the labor of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy." (6)

The first part of this statement gives a brief definition of classes, pointing to the fact that each socio-economic order has its own specific social-class structure, and that the division into classes is determined by the position of classes in this structure. The definition is then made more precise by pointing to three inseparably linked characteristics of class differences, corresponding to three basic elements in production relations: relation to means of production, role in the social organization of labor, position in the system of distribution of material goods.

(We shall return to these characteristics as they apply to a socialist society.) Finally, the concluding part of the definition sums up: the fact that classes occupy different places in the system of social production makes it possible to appropriate the labor of others.

The Specific Character of Social Mobility Under Socialism

The Leninist definition of classes applies to all socio-economic formations and their stages to the extent that they are characterized by a division into classes. It provides a key to understanding not only the division into classes but also the social structure as a whole, which includes not only classes but also nonclass social groups and the strata included in these classes and groups, insofar as they are social in nature and differ from one another by their relation to the means of production, their place in the social division of labor, and their position in the sphere of distribution. The general definition of classes also applies to a socialist society to the extent that it remains a class society, although one without exploitation and class antagonisms.

What are the common features and specific character of social mobility in a socialist society as compared to a capitalist society? The common features are conditioned by the fact that capitalism and socialism coexist in our epoch and are at approximately the same level of development of productive forces, and thus cannot help but have common features. However, despite the approximately equal level of development of their productive forces, these two social formations are fundamentally different as regards the nature of their economic and, therefore, all other social relations. From this there also follow fundamental differences in the nature and results of the process of social mobility.

Social mobility under capitalism is also distinctive as compared to precapitalist class societies, with their system of "noneconomic compulsion" (Marx), their divisions into castes and estates. Social mobility under capitalism is not restrained

by such clearly expressed political and legal barriers; it depends mainly on property barriers. The classics of Marxism-Leninism noted this repeatedly. Lenin wrote: "The essence of class society (and, consequently, of class education) consists in full juridical equality, full equality of rights for all citizens, full equality of rights and access to education for the proletariat. . . . In contrast to estates, classes always leave perfectly free the transfer of particular individuals from one class to another." (7) This freedom is formal, not real.

In a socialist society, as a result of fundamental changes in the social-class structure, most of the real barriers to social mobility disappear, the character and social consequences of mobility change qualitatively, and, finally, the nature of the stimuli which impel people to change their social position also changes. For the first time in history this mobility becomes one of the forms of the gradual elimination of social differences.

But certain common features, conditioned by the level of material production, create a number of similar tendencies in social mobility under socialism and capitalism. This applies to urbanization processes and the associated migration of the rural population, the increase in the number and proportion of individuals engaged in mental work and skilled workers in the employed population, and so on. Demographic processes also exercise a similar influence on social mobility: the decline in birth rates associated with the growth of the urban population and the employment of women in production; the increase in the average length of life and the change in the rate of "rotation" associated with this, i.e., the renewal of employed personnel in different fields of activity. Social mobility of youth under both capitalism and socialism is affected by the inevitable lengthening of the training period for work associated with scientific-technical progress. The theories of "convergence of capitalism and socialism," of a "common industrial society," and the like, which are widely accepted in bourgeois sociology, speculate precisely on these common features, studiously avoiding and ignoring the fundamental differences between capitalism and socialism, including differences in the processes of social mobility.

The boundaries of similarity between phenomena must always be clearly defined, and the essential nature of differences within these boundaries must be distinguished. There are a number of problems of this kind which are part of our theme and which require a particularly careful and specific approach. We refer, above all, to the question of the applicability to a developed socialist society, where the class hierarchy has been eliminated, of the concept of vertical mobility, i.e., social movement along vertical lines.

In our view, it is appropriate to speak of vertical gradations in the social structure of a socialist society to the extent that inequality in the degree of complexity of labor continues to prevail. This inequality is expressed in the fact that more complex labor requires higher levels of qualification and education of the individual, and is therefore more highly remunerated by society in accordance with the principles of socialism. Hence, advancement of a worker to more complex labor as a result of an increase in his educational level, higher skills, the accumulation of experience, etc., can be regarded as "vertical" mobility, i.e., as social advancement. It is in this sense that we sometimes speak of a personal "career."

Such mobility occurs primarily from one social stratum to another within a given class, for example, when an unskilled worker becomes a skilled worker, when a technician becomes an engineer, and so on. However, insofar as the labor of specialists as a whole is more skilled, and is generally remunerated at somewhat higher levels in all branches, advancement to this stratum can be regarded in a certain sense as upward vertical mobility. That is how the matter is regarded by public opinion. And that is how public opinion regards advancement to the executive staff of an enterprise or institution, which requires not only the retention of existing qualifications but also additional knowledge and effort. When an employed person advances (fully or partially) to the performance of organizational functions, his labor becomes more complex as a rule.

But this kind of mobility in our society is of a qualitatively different nature than the transformation of a small proprietor into a large one, or entry into the privileged classes and strata,

under capitalism. The attempts of some reactionary bourgeois sociologists to "prove" the existence of a social hierarchy in the USSR in the old sense of the word, their arguments concerning a "Soviet elite," etc., have nothing in common with Soviet reality. Such fabrications are slanderous in nature and are widely used by imperialist propaganda in the ideological struggle against socialist countries.

As an example, one can present some of the arguments of S. Lipset. He states that the "phenomenon" of collective mobility has "not been studied at all by social scientists," and that rapid changes in the position of skilled workers, for example, may be connected with "rapid industrialization" in the so-called developing countries (regardless of their social structure). "It is possible that this is occurring in the Soviet Union, in other communist countries, and in various developing countries in other parts of the world. Social revolution, by downgrading certain classes, may improve the position of certain others and may expand the opportunities open to them. Some communist countries are deliberately moving to give workers and peasants, as well as their children, greater opportunities for education and for achieving improved positions." (8) Having thus paid his respects to objectivity, Lipset then argues that in the Soviet Union the opportunities for obtaining an education and the chances of occupying "high positions" will steadily decline for children of "simple origins" compared to those for the "elite."

It obviously never occurs to a bourgeois sociologist that the "elite," "simple origins," and similar concepts, which are extensively used in reference to an exploitative social order, are completely inapplicable to a socialist society.

These arguments of Lipset contain another thesis that is readily utilized at the present time not only by bourgeois propagandists of anticommunism, but is also widely applied by right and "left" revisionists in their anti-Soviet propaganda. We refer to the thesis that "initially," immediately after the revolution, large-scale social mobility occurred in Soviet society, but that "subsequently" social stability began to prevail and that our socialist society increasingly came to "resemble" a capitalist one, and that this similarity will increase with the

passage of time.

Contemporary socialist society differs markedly from what it was during the period of the struggle for the building of socialism, and qualitatively new features have also appeared in the processes of social mobility. But one can counterpose these two stages in the development of Soviet society against each other only by completely ignoring actual facts.

Another slanderous approach is the attempt of some anti-communists to "demonstrate" that the existence of classes under socialism allegedly "contradicts" Marxism-Leninism. Thus, with feigned amazement, L. Labedz "finds" social-class differences and social mobility in Soviet society: "Doctrinal principles," he announces, "do not correspond to the current social situation," since Marx and Engels presumably did "not foresee" that the problem of social mobility would exist in a socialist ("classless") society. (9) Labedz makes believe that he does not know that Marx, Engels and Lenin regarded a socialist society as only the first phase of a communist social order, and that in this phase certain kinds of inequality are inevitably retained. One of these is the existence of social-class differences, with which social mobility is associated under socialism. The existence of such mobility in Soviet society not only does not contradict the theory of scientific communism but, on the contrary, confirms the well-known Marxist proposition concerning the gradual character of the transition from the first phase of communist society to the second.

The absence of a class hierarchy in Soviet society has led some sociologists in the USSR and in other socialist countries to take the position that social mobility under such conditions has been completely supplanted by occupational mobility. We cannot agree unreservedly, for example, with the following treatment of horizontal and vertical mobility: "By horizontal mobility we mean the progress of a worker within his specialty, and by vertical mobility — the mastery of other specialties and occupations, the transition from manual labor to mental labor, from executor-type labor to creative labor." (10) Social mobility may not be connected with either "the progress of a worker within his specialty" or with "the mastery of other specialties

and occupations." Thus, the movement of a machine-operator from a state farm to a collective farm and back again is necessarily associated with a change in social position (class position, in this case), but it is not at all connected with a change in occupation. On the other hand, a change in occupation or an increase in skills does not always involve a change in social position. There is no doubt that occupational mobility is comparatively easier to observe and measure, but beyond this we must be able to see the more profound and complex processes of social mobility, although they are sometimes more difficult to distinguish.

In measuring social mobility we can calculate the "inflow" into, and the "outflow" from, a particular social stratum. These measurements are quite feasible and can rely on mathematical methods, with which we can derive indices of the mobility of individuals comprising a given social stratum and discover the objective tendencies of this process.

In investigating and measuring social mobility in Soviet society, the differences between the processes of intergenerational mobility (here the investigation may embrace two and even more generations) and intragenerational mobility are clearly evident. In the case of the former, study of those changes which have occurred in the social position of children (and grandchildren) compared to the social position of their parents (and grandparents) not only permits us to observe social changes in society as a whole, but also to follow the reflection of these changes in the fate of each succeeding generation. In the latter case, the investigators obtain a picture of changes in the fates of individuals within the span of a single generation, or more precisely, during its period of work activity.

The study of intergenerational mobility presents greater difficulties than that of intragenerational mobility. The problem here is not only that it is more difficult to obtain data on preceding generations. There is the important methodological difficulty of determining the social origin of individuals in each succeeding generation. The greater the extent to which class and other social barriers have disappeared and been destroyed in the process of building the socialist society, the more frequently

we find socially heterogeneous marriages. Therefore, determination of the social origins of children born of such marriages can only be conditional in nature (for example, according to the social position of the father), or of a dual character (with the social position of both parents being considered).

These are some of the methodological questions associated with social mobility under socialism. We have not undertaken a full survey of these questions, especially since many of them require clarification on the basis of empirical material, which is presented below in Chapters 3 to 6.*

Notes

- 1) V. I. Lenin, Poln. sobr. soch., Vol. 1, p. 167.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 3) A. Inkeles, What Is Sociology?, Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1966, p. 86.
- 4) Statistical Abstract of the United States, Washington, 1968, p. 225.
- 5) G. Kolko, Wealth and Power in America, New York, 1966, p. 6.
- 6) Lenin, *op. cit.*, Vol. 39, p. 115.
- 7) *Ibid.*, Vol. 2, pp. 476-477.
- 8) S. M. Lipset, "Problèmes posés par les recherches comparatives sur la mobilité et la développement," Revue internationale des science sociales. Les données dans la recherche comparative, UNESCO, 1964, Vol. XVI, No. 1, p. 41 [retranslated from the Russian — Eds.].
- 9) L. Labedz, "Structure de l'intelligentsia soviétique," La Revue Socialiste, 1962, No. 152, pp. 367, 381.
- 10) Rabochii klass i tekhnicheskii progress, Moscow, 1965, p. 289.

*Most of Chapter 4 is translated next.