

# **inqaba YA BASEBENZI**

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### **Historical Materialism**

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This pamphlet outlines the Marxist understanding of how human society developed — from the 'primitive communism' of early tribal society through various forms of class-divided societies to modern capitalism. It shows how the basis has been laid for a world-wide transition to socialism.

Written originally for workers in Britain, the pamphlet draws mainly on examples from European history to illustrate its points. But the general method it sets out applies universally to the changes that take place as the productive powers of society develop.

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Historical materialism is the application of Marxist science to historical development. The fundamental proposition of historical materialism can be summed up in a sentence: "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." (Marx, in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*.)

What does this mean?

Readers of the *Daily Mirror* (a British daily paper—*Editor*) will be familiar with the 'Perishers' cartoon strip. In one incident the old dog Wellington wanders down to a pool full of crabs. The crabs speculate about the mysterious divinity, the "eyeballs in the sky", which appears to them.

The point is, that is actually how you would look at things if your universe were a pond. Your consciousness is determined by your being. Thought is limited by the range of experience of the species.

We know very little about how primitive people thought, but we know what they couldn't have been thinking about. They wouldn't have wandered about wondering what the football results were, for instance. League football presupposes big towns able to get crowds large enough to pay professional footballers and the rest of the club staff. Industrial towns in their turn can only emerge when the productivity of labour has developed to the point where a part of society can be fed by the rest, and devote themselves to producing other requirements than food.

In other words, an extensive division of labour must exist. The other side of this is that people must be accustomed to working for money and buying the things they want from others—including tickets to the football—which of course was not the case in primitive society.

So this simple example shows how even things like professional football are dependent on the way society makes its daily bread, on people's 'social existence'.

After all, what is mankind? The great *idealist* philosopher Hegel said that 'man' is a *thinking being*. Actually Hegel's view was a slightly more sophisticated form of the usual religious view that man is endowed by his Creator with a brain to admire His handiwork.

It is true that thinking *is* one way we are different from dung beetles, sticklebacks and lizards. But why did humans develop the capacity to think?

Over a hundred years ago, Engels pointed out that upright posture marked the transition from ape to man—a completely materialist explanation. This view has been confirmed by the most recent researches of anthropologists such as Leakey.

Upright posture liberated the hands for gripping with an opposable thumb. This enabled tools to be used and developed.

Upright posture also allowed early humans to rely more on the eyes, rather than the other senses, for sensing the world around. The use of the hands developed the powers of the brain through the medium of the eyes.

Engels was a dialectical materialist. In no way did he minimise the importance of thought—rather he *explain-*

*ed* how it arose. We can also see that Benjamin Franklin, the eighteenth-century US politician and inventor, was much nearer a materialist approach than Hegel when he defined man as a *tool-making animal*.

Darwin showed a hundred years ago that there is a struggle for existence, and species survive through natural selection. At first sight early humans didn't have a lot going for them, compared with the speed of the cheetah, the strength of the lion, or the sheer intimidating bulk of the elephant. Yet humans came to dominate the planet and, more recently, to drive many of these more fearsome animals to the point of extinction.

*What differentiates mankind from the lower animals is that, however self-reliant animals such as lions may seem, they ultimately just take external nature around them for granted, whereas mankind progressively masters nature.*

The process whereby mankind masters nature is *labour*. At Marx's grave, Engels stated that his friend's great discovery was that "mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing, and therefore work before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion etc."

In another dialectical formulation, Engels says that "the hand is not only the organ of labour, it is also the product of labour."

While we can't read the mind of our primitive human beings, we can take a pretty good guess about what they were thinking most of the time—food. The struggle against want has dominated history ever since.

Marxists are often accused of being '*economic determinists*'. Actually, Marxists are far from denying the importance of ideas or the active role of individuals in history. But precisely because we are active, we understand the *limits* of individual activity, and the fact that the appropriate social conditions must exist before our ideas and our activity can be effective.

Our academic opponents are generally passive cynics who exalt individual activity amid the port and walnuts from over-stuffed armchairs. We understand, with Marx, that people "make their own history...but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past". We need to understand how society is developing in order to intervene in the process. That is what we mean when we say Marxism is a science of perspectives.

Language, the currency of thought, is itself the creation of labour. We can see this even among jackals and other hunting animals that rely upon teamwork rather than just brute force or speed to kill their prey. They have a series of barked commands and warnings—the beginnings of language.

That is how language evolved among people, as a result of their co-operative labour. The germs of rational thinking among the higher apes, and the limited use of tools by some animals, have remained at a beginning stage, while reaching fruition only in human beings.

We have seen that labour distinguishes mankind from the other animals—that mankind progressively changes nature through labour, and in doing so changes itself. It follows that there is a real measure of progress through all the miseries and pitfalls of human history—the increas-



ing ability of men and women to master nature and subjugate it to their own requirements: in other words, the increasing *productivity of labour*.

To each stage in the development of the productive forces corresponds a certain set of *production relations*.

Production relation means the way people organise themselves to gain their daily bread. Production relations are thus the skeleton of every form of society. They provide the conditions of social existence that determine human consciousness.

Marx explained how the development of the productive forces brings into existence different production relations, and different forms of class society.

By a 'class' we mean a group of people in society with the same relationship to the means of production. The class which owns and controls the means of production rules society. This, at the same time, enables it to force the oppressed or labouring class to toil in the rulers' interests. The labouring class is forced to produce a surplus which the ruling class lives off.

Marx explained:

"The specific economic form in which unpaid *surplus-labour* is pumped out of the direct producers determines the relationship of rulers and ruled, as it grows directly out of production itself and, in turn, reacts upon it as a determining element. Upon this, however, is founded the entire formation of the economic community which grows up out of the production relations themselves; thereby simultaneously its specific political form. It is always the direct relationship of the owners of the conditions of production to the direct producers—a relation always naturally corresponding to a definite stage in the development of the methods of labour and thereby its social productivity—which reveals the innermost secret, the hidden basis of the entire social structure, and with it the political form of the relation of sovereignty and dependence, in short the corresponding specific form of the state." (*Capital*, Vol III.)

## Primitive communism

In the earliest stages of society people did not go into factories, work to produce things they would not normally consume, and be 'rewarded' at the end of the week with pieces of coloured paper or decorated discs which other people would be quite prepared to accept in exchange for the food, clothing, etc., which they needed. Such behaviour would have struck our remote ancestors as quite fantastic.

Nor did many of the other features of modern society we so much take for granted exist. What socialist has not heard the argument "People are bound to be greedy and grabbing. You can't get socialism because you can't change human nature?"

In fact, society *divided into classes* has existed for no more than about 10 000 years—one hundredth of the time mankind has been on this planet. For the other 99% of the time there was no class society, that is, no enforced inequalities, no state, and no family in the modern sense.

This was not because primitive people were unaccountably more noble than us, but because production relations produced a different sort of society, and so a different 'human nature'. Being determines consciousness, and if people's social being changes—if the society they

live under changes—then their consciousness will also change.

The basis of primitive society was gathering and hunting. The only division of labour was that between men and women—for the entirely natural biological reason that women were burdened much of the time with young children. They gathered vegetable foods while the men hunted.

Thus each sex played an important part in production. On the basis of studying tribes such as the !Kung in the Kalahari desert, who still live under primitive communist conditions, it has been estimated that the female contribution to the food supply may well have been more important than the male's.

All these tribal societies had features in common. The hunting grounds were regarded as the common property of the tribe. How could they be anything else when hunting itself is a collective activity? The very insecurity of existence leads to sharing. It's no good hiding a dead hippo from your mates—you won't be able to eat it before it rots anyway, and there may well come a time when other tribesmen have a superfluity while you're in distress. It's common sense to share and share alike.

Private property did exist in personal implements, but in the most different tribal societies there existed similar rules to burn or bury these with the body of the owner, in order to prevent the accumulation of inequality. Even after these tribes began to develop agriculture there was a progressive redivision of the land, so strong were the norms of primitive communism. The Roman historian Tacitus noted such rules among the German tribes.

Women were held in high esteem in such societies. They contributed at least equally to the wealth of the tribe. They developed separate skills—it seems women invented pottery and even made the crucial breakthrough to agriculture.

No such institution as *the state* was necessary, for there were no fundamental antagonistic class interests tearing society apart. Individual disputes could be sorted out within the tribe.

Old men with experience certainly played leading parts in the decision-making of the tribe. They were chiefs, however, and not kings—their authority was deserved or it did not exist. As late as the third century AD (when it was ceasing to be true) Athanaric, leader of the German tribe, the Visigoths, said: "I have authority, not power".

Society developed because it had to. Beginning in tropical Africa, as population grew to cover more inhospitable parts of the globe, people had to use their power of thought and labour to develop—or die. From gathering fruit, nuts, etc., it was a step forward to cultivating the land—actually ensuring that vegetable food was to hand. From hunting it was a step to husbandry, penning in the animals. Tribal society remained the norm.

The first great revolution in mankind's history was the agricultural or neolithic revolution. Grains were selected and sown, and the ground ploughed up with draught animals. For the first time a substantial *surplus* over and above the subsistence needs of the toilers came into existence.

Under primitive communism there had been simply no basis for an idle class. There was no point in enslaving someone else, since they could only provide for their own needs. Now the possibility arose for idleness for *some*, but mankind could still not provide enough for *everyone*.



to lead such a life.

On this basis *class societies* arose—societies divided between possessing and labouring classes.

The main issue in the class struggle down the ages has been the struggle over the surplus produced by the toilers. The way this surplus was appropriated—grabbed—depended on the different mode of production inaugurated by agriculture. This change provided the base for the complete transformation of social life.

Tribal norms died hard. At first, land was redivided. Even in feudal Europe, village communities in some areas carried on the traditions of primitive communism in a transmuted form by redivision of the original peasant land.

But agriculture, unlike hunting, could be more an individual activity. By working harder you could get more and, when everyone lived on the margin of survival, that was important.

Moreover, the agricultural revolution—involving the use of draught animals in ploughing, etc., mainly handled by men—relegated women to the home, working up materials provided by the man. It was the lack of a direct role in production that led to the world-historic defeat of the female sex.

Men wanted to pass on their unequal property to a male heir. In primitive communist society *descent* had been traced through the female line (*inheritance* had been unimportant). Now inheritance began to be traced through the male line.

We do not know exactly how class society came into being, but we can piece together the story from bits of evidence available to us. We call this process a revolution, and so it was in the profoundest sense of the word.

But we must remember that transitional forms between the different types of society were in existence for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years before the new type definitively replaced the old. Human progress did not proceed evenly but according to the *law of combined and uneven development*.

It was not the well-situated people of equatorial Africa, but people in more temperate climes (probably the near East) who were first forced to develop agriculture.

The first agriculture was of course very rudimentary, probably consisting of 'slash and burn' cultivation. This meant that the tribe kept on the move, for the cleared land offered good crops for only a couple of years before yields dropped off.

Thus tribal society remained in existence, but underwent modifications. Tacitus describes the military democracy of the German tribes of his time, with a constitution of a war chief, councils of elders and assembly of warriors (women had now been disenfranchised). This was typical for tribes at this stage of development.

Though the assembly could reject or approve all decisions (by banging their spears on their shields), in the war chief we see the embryo of a king, and in the council of elders the outline of a ruling aristocracy.

The landlord rulers of Rome were organised in the senate ('old men') and the Anglo-Saxon kings were advised by a Witan ('wise men'), both relics of a democratic tribal constitution that had been turned into its opposite. The German tribes were now organised for warfare *because a surplus existed*, however precariously, which could be taken unless defended.

Anthropologists such as Leakey have shown that, contrary to the view of writers such as Desmond Morris (*The Naked Ape*) and Robert Ardrey (*The Hunting*

*Hypothesis*), the human being is not *inherently* aggressive. While primitive communist societies engaged in battles, e.g. over scarce hunting grounds, wars began to be an *established and regular feature* of history only at the stage when there was something worth fighting for.

We have spoken of agriculture as being the breakthrough to a society where a surplus could be produced. In fact the raising of the productivity of labour made possible by agriculture allowed a more extensive division of labour—people could turn their hands to producing other things.

So the agricultural revolution brought in its train associated revolutions in technique (such as in pottery and metal-working) and in the whole social structure.

Inequalities developed between different tribal peoples as well as within the tribes. For geographical and other reasons some tribes began to concentrate on stock-rearing, fishing, etc.

As agricultural peoples began to settle down around villages fortified to protect their surplus (or rather, the surplus some of their number had acquired) these fishing and stock-rearing peoples took over the job of exchanging goods. Before, exchange had been a casual act between tribes who met one another on their travels. Now it became a regular occasion.

Metal was of course one of the most important items of trade. The Jews were one of the most famous stock-rearing peoples (in the Bible, the wealth of Abraham is always measured in herds) who developed into traders between Egypt and the Mediterranean civilisations.

Trade developed from ritual gifts between tribes. What was the measure of the value of a gift? As soon as people could form some conception of how long it took to produce the gifts they got, they would attempt to outdo the donors in generosity by giving the product of more labour in return.

As trade became more regular, the need naturally arose for a *universal equivalent*—something which could readily be exchanged in trade and which would be accepted generally as a measure of value. At first this need was met by cattle (the Latin *pecunia* meaning 'money' is derived from *pecus* meaning cattle).

Later this need was fulfilled more conveniently by ingots of metal, in which there was a burgeoning trade, and which were stamped by the monarchs as a guarantee of weight.

Ritual gifts would usually be given to the chief as representative of the tribe. As society grew wealthier, it became worth-while to be a chief. The chief's house became the beginnings of a market place in the village.

Metal working placed a tremendous new power for good or ill in the hands of men. Metal, particularly copper and bronze, was rare. The first need of these new societies was defence of the living standards they had built up. Naturally the tribal chief, as the leading fighting man, should be first to avail himself of the new strategic material.

The consequences of this are to be seen in the legends of the ancient Greek poet, Homer. He describes the city of Troy besieged by an army of bronze-armoured Greek military aristocrats. Not mentioned much are the host of common soldiers, often armed only with flint-tipped spears, who did most of the fighting and dying. Clearly they are not considered a subject for literature.

The ancient legends of Homer depict a society where primitive communism had been thrust aside by the evolution of tribal chiefs through a life of war and plunder



into a network of aristocrats and kings. A ruling class now had the monopoly of effective armed might. Thus the development of tribal society had produced its own 'grave-diggers', putting an end to classless equality.

Incidentally the Germanic sagas arose at an identical stage in the dissolution of German tribal society. Their 'heroic age' produced similar art forms (epic poetry) and even a similar system of the gods, corresponding to a similar stage in the development of production as in ancient Greece.

The Bronze Age civilisation described by Homer was swept away by Dorian invasions, a period equivalent to the west-European Dark Ages. The historical record dies out for hundreds of years. But the invaders brought something new—iron.

Iron was potentially more plentiful than bronze. Homer's ruling class could not have used it to arm the common people, for that would have deprived them of their military monopoly, the basis of their social power. They fell before invaders who were still tribesmen.

The invaders' society was not class-divided. So they all used iron weapons and were invincible for their time. Sometimes mankind has to step back in order to go forward.

## **The Asiatic mode of production**

Civilisation developed differently in different places. So far as we know, it arose first in the Nile delta of Egypt and in Mesopotamia (in what is now Iraq), though recent discoveries suggest it may also have developed independently in India and in South-East Asia at around the same time.

In both Egypt and Mesopotamia the ruling class seems to have sprung from the elevation of a stratum of priests, rather than chiefs, above the rest of society. This is because the priests had the leisure to develop a calendar, allowing them to foretell the coming of the Nile floods, and arithmetic to develop the centrally planned irrigation works which first produced a massive surplus.

The interest of Egyptian priests in maths and astronomy was thus not accidental, but rooted in the requirements of production.

Because of the requirements of planned irrigation, as Marx explains, "The communal conditions for real appropriation through labour, such as irrigation systems (very important among the Asian peoples), means of communication, etc., will then appear as the work of the superior entity—the despotic government which is poised above the small communities".

The Asiatic state which was not accountable in any way to the village communities, will feel entitled to appropriate the surplus as a tribute. This tribute is exacted through state ownership of the land: "...the integrating entity which stands above all these small communities may appear as the superior or sole proprietor, and the real communities therefore only as hereditary possessors."

The villages were largely self-sufficient, rendering tribute to the Asiatic despotism in order for the "general conditions of production" (irrigation, etc.) to be maintained. Handicrafts and agriculture were combined within each village. The dispersed villages were unable to organise effectively against their exploitation, so the whole system was very resistant to change.

This is what Marx and Engels meant when they said that such societies were "outside history". India, for instance, was invaded by one set of conquerors after another, but none of these political changes reached beneath the surface.

The Ptolemies, Greek successors of Alexander the Great, who came from a society where private property in land was at the root of their social system, left the system as they found it when they conquered Egypt. After all they were very satisfied with the revenues it provided them.

It was only after thousands of years, when British capitalism conquered India and strove to introduce private property in land in order to destroy the unity of native agriculture and handicrafts, and develop the preconditions for capitalism, that the Asiatic mode of production was finally destroyed. The result was the decline of the irrigation systems and a series of horrible famines throughout the nineteenth century.

The Asiatic mode of production saw the first development of class society, though retaining certain features of primitive communism, such as collective tilling of the soil. It raised production to a higher level than it had ever been before, and then stagnated.

Thus, in vast areas of the globe, there arose a form of society completely different from anything seen in Western Europe. Slavery was known, but it was not the dominant mode of production. In contrast with western feudalism, the surplus was extorted by the central state, rather than by landlords.

Once civilisation was established and maintained, it was bound to radiate its effects all around it, whether through war or trade. Egypt was always dependent on outside areas for trade, thus stimulating the advance of civilisation in Crete and thereby giving an enormous impetus to the trading communities on the Greek coast to develop. Here civilisation found relations of production—private land-ownership providing an unlimited spur to private enrichment—which could take humanity forward again.

## **Ancient Greece: slavery and democracy**

Thus, when Greece next enters the historical record, its class structure is very different from the time of Homer. Trading cities have sprung up all around the coast. All these cities seem to have been dominated at first by small ruling classes of landlords who monopolised political rights.

We can speculate that these landlords may have been the original occupants of the central city zones. As trade developed, the price of their land would have rocketed, and they would have been able to use their position to control the marketing of produce. Certainly they used their dominant position to lend seed to the poorer citizens living on the outskirts, and to enforce a debt bondage on many. (It is still a matter of scholarly debate whether the rural people mortgaged their lands or themselves—but the form of exploitation is not important for us here).

As trade developed, the merchant and artisan classes grew in importance, and campaigned with the poor peasants for political rights. Once class society had been established, it radiated throughout the main population centres through warfare and the chance of getting yourself a slice of the surplus.

All the city states in Greece and Rome were organised



around the same principles. The whole city-state ('polis' in Greek) was unified against every other city-state, but divided within itself.

It was divided on *class* lines—and between *citizens* and *slaves*.

At first the poor citizens ('plebeians' as they were called in Rome) were blocked from all political rights. Their struggle was political—to gain a say in the decision-making of the state.

Military survival was also a necessity, and for that the state depended on the support of the peasantry in the army. The wealthy landlord class needed the poor citizens to fight for them. That is why a representative of the upper class, Solon in Athens (the case we know best), actually redistributed the land to the plebeians in 594 B.C.

In Athens, a predominantly trading centre with a higher concentration of merchants and artisans, the small men were eventually able to win full democratic rights. Poor men were paid for public service, and over 5 000 citizens regularly met in the assembly to discuss policy.

The struggle for democracy went through a number of stages. In city after city the landed oligarchy were first overthrown by tyrants. These men bore a remarkable resemblance to the later absolutist monarchs who balanced between the feudal aristocracy and the rising class of merchant capitalists.

Like the absolutists, they used the deadlock in the class struggle to grab political power for themselves. Like the Tudor monarchs in England, the political stability they guaranteed allowed the further rise of the monied classes, who from being their sturdiest prop became their staunchest foe, as they themselves formed aspirations to untrammelled political power. So the era of the tyrants ended in all the commercial cities of Greece in 'democratic' revolution.

But Athenian democracy—democracy for the *citizens*—had as its foundation *the exploitation of a class of non-citizens: slaves who were without political rights*. Athenian democracy was in fact a mechanism for enforcing the interests of the ruling class over the exploited slave class—and for defending the interests of the ruling class in war.

The *polis* was an institution geared up for permanent war. The power of the city state was based on independent peasants capable of arming themselves ('hoplites'). The victory of democracy was inevitable in Athens after the poor citizens won the naval battle of Salamis against the Persians for the city. Though too poor to arm themselves, they provided the rowers for the Athenian navy. A precarious unity of interests was established between rich and poor citizens through expansion outwards and the conquest of slaves.

By comparison with later Roman slave society the Greek slave mode of production was relatively 'democratic'—*as far as the citizens were concerned*. Even poor citizens could own a slave to help around the farm or workshop, or lease them out to work on slave gangs.

Thus the squeeze was off the poor citizen, for the rich had an alternative labour supply. The Greek states where democracy did not develop were mainly inland, where landed wealth was naturally more important than commercial riches.

*Slavery itself was only possible because labour was now capable of yielding a surplus*. That surplus was appropriated by a ruling class who owned the means of production—in this case the slaves themselves. The state was the state of the ruling class. The whole structure of

society was based upon slave labour—all the miracles of art, culture and philosophy were only possible because an exploited class laboured so slave-holders could have leisure.

Slave society had its own dynamic. Its success depended upon the continual appropriation of more slaves, more unpaid labour.

"Wherever *slavery* is the main form of production it turns labour into servile activity, consequently makes it dishonourable for freemen. Thus the way out of such a mode of production is barred, while on the other hand slavery is an impediment to more developed production, which urgently requires its removal. This contradiction spells the doom of all production based on slavery and of all communities based on it. A solution comes about in most cases through the forcible subjection of the deteriorating communities by other, stronger ones (Greece by Macedonia and later Rome). As long as these themselves have slavery as their foundation there is merely a shifting of the centre and a repetition of the process on a higher plane until (Rome) finally a people conquers that replaces slavery by another form of production." (Engels, in his preparatory writings for *Anti-Duhring*)

To illustrate this explanation, let us turn to Rome, where slavery exhausted its potential, and Western European society finally blundered out of the blind alley it found itself in.

## Roman slavery

Roman society, after the expulsion of its early kings, presents at first the same aspect as the Greek city states when they were dominated by landlords (in Rome called "patricians" and organised in the Senate).

Initially they monopolised all political rights. The plebeians waged a magnificent struggle for a share in power, including the use of the agrarian general strike, in the form of a 'secession of the tribes'.

But the plebeians were not just poor citizens. They included wealthy merchants who just wanted to join the patricians in their control of state power. They headed the plebeian movement and, when they got what they wanted out of it, deserted it.

One of the definite gains of these struggles was the abolition of debt bondage. The gap was filled by the massive expansion of the Roman republic and, through conquest, the acquisition of hordes of slaves.

The difference with Greece was that the Roman patricians hung on to power, despite the concessions wrung from them, and monopolised the benefits of this influx. They linked slave labour to the exploitation of the great farms (*latifundia*). In so doing they inevitably undercut the plebeians who, organised in legions, provided the basis for Roman military greatness.

The dispossessed legionnaires could come back after twenty years of military service to find their farms choked with weeds. Inevitably they were ruined and drifted into the town to form a rootless, propertyless proletariat. But as the nineteenth century anti-capitalist social critic Sismondi said, "whereas the Roman proletariat lived at the expense of society, modern society lives at the expense of the proletariat".

In Rome, the Gracchus brothers led a last desperate struggle to save the independent plebeians. Both were cut



down by the bought mob of the patricians.

The crisis of Roman society in the first century B.C. the last century of the republic, was two-fold in origin.

On the one hand the class struggle had reached a deadlock. The contradictions spilled over into the army. One general after another cemented the support of their troops to their own political ambitions by promising grants of land which the plebeians could not get through their own struggle.

On the other hand, a tiny oligarchy from Rome was now ruling a world empire through corrupt provincial governors and tax collectors. This form of rule was quite inadequate. This was brought home in the Social Wars, when Rome's Italian allies rose in revolt for rights of citizenship. The only way the Romans could 'win' was by enlisting Italian allies on their side—by offering rights of citizenship!

So one military man after another stepped into the power vacuum and progressively enlarged their own power. Finally Caesar Augustus did away with the republic, relying particularly on the Italian landlords, whom he gave a say in the running of the state.

Gradually all became citizens, and the privilege was made meaningless, for all were mere subjects of the Roman Empire. Not for nothing did critics of the French emperor, Napoleon Bonaparte, call his policies 'Caesarism'. Exactly the same balancing between classes and groups while building up personal power characterised both men. Augustus' empire inaugurated a long period of peace. But for a slave empire, peace is more a menace than war. The supply of slaves dried up and the price of slaves rose disastrously. Rome had reached its natural frontiers. It was surrounded by tribes, known as 'barbarians', which it could not conquer.

## Decline of the Roman empire

In this situation the limits of slave production showed themselves. The slave has no incentive to develop production. He only works under threat of the whip. Free men for their part despised labour, which they associated with being an '*instrumentum vocale*', an 'item of property with a voice', as the Roman jurists called slaves.

The tragedy of Roman society was that the class struggle was three-cornered. The poor freemen had their quarrel with the great slave-holders, but the only pathetic bit of dignity they had to hang on to was that they were free men, and thus they always made common cause with their oppressors in the army of the polis in conquering lands for slaves and holding down slave rebellions.

The slaves for their part lived in a world where slavery was universal, and so dreamed for the most part of 'enslaving the slave-holders', not creating a world without slaves.

The burden of keeping together this enormous empire created a huge swollen state power which guzzled up a great part of the surplus in taxes. The only self-confident force capable of acting in a centralised way among the human atoms created by imperial despotism was the army. For a hundred years the praetorian guard made and unmade emperors at their pleasure.

The emperors had one way out of this—to withdraw legions from the frontier and march against the praetorian guard in Rome. All this did was to reproduce the contradictions on a bigger scale.

When the Emperor Septimus Severus died, he offered this piece of distilled political wisdom to his sons: "Pay the soldiers. Nothing else matters." Nobody in the Roman empire made any secret of the fact that the state is essentially 'armed bodies of men'.

As productivity declined, so naturally did trade, and the villas of the land-owners became increasingly self-sufficient, developing in the direction of the medieval manor (see page 9) which was to replace them. The flight from money was further boosted by inflation at the end of the third century. The emperors made sure that they didn't lose out, by demanding taxes in kind.

At the same time they were squeezing the patrician (landlord) class, now deprived of political power, by forcing them to shell out enormous amounts on building and circuses. The landlords responded by fleeing to the country and setting up on their self-sufficient country estates.

Slavery was beginning to die out, not because of humanitarian ideas supposedly introduced by Christianity, but because it simply did not pay. The only way slave production could take society forward was through the conquest of enormous numbers of slaves, who could be worked to death in a few years and replaced.

These conquests had been made possible by the Roman legions of armed plebeians. But the plebeians had been destroyed by the very success of big slave-worked farms.

By this time the Romans could only find barbarian mercenaries to man their armies. Thus Rome was defended from the barbarians by barbarians! Clearly the empire was living on borrowed time.

Slavery was still important, particularly in domestic service to the rich, but it gradually ceased to be the dominant mode of production. As production and trade shrank, it became clear to the landlords that it was pointless feeding men to work on the fields all the year round when, because of the natural rhythms of agricultural work, they were idle half the time. Much better to get them to fend for themselves in periods of slack!

Former slaves were rented plots of land from which they had to pay a regular part of their produce to the landlord as well as wrench a subsistence for their family. The state also derived most of its revenue from a land tax which pressed on the peasantry.

In time, because of the natural tendency for peasants to get into debt in times of bad harvest, they were bound to the soil in a serf-like condition. This is called the period of the 'colonnate'.

Eventually the Western Empire was overthrown, not because the barbarians had become more aggressive and threatening, but because of the inner rottenness of the empire. We have seen that the productive forces were already in decline; and in the colonate some of the tendencies, that were to come to fruition under feudalism, were in the process of coming into existence.

## The transition to feudalism

The new society created after the Germanic (barbarian) invasions of Western Europe was a synthesis of declining Roman civilisation and German tribal society in the process of evolving into class society.

Like the Dorian invasion of early Greek civilisation it seemed a step back. The decline in production affected every area of social life. Such chronicles of the Dark Ages as survived (like Gregory of Tours' '*History of the*



Franks') show a childlike credulity in all kinds of ridiculous miracles—an attitude which would have been laughed to scorn by a Roman patrician historian.

All the achievements of art and culture only survived in suspended animation in the institutions of the church. But the barbarians also brought new ideas and a possibility of moving forward once again. To take just one example, the Germans had developed a heavy plough which turned over a furrow rather than just scratching at the surface, and so increased grain yields.

What had been happening among the German tribes in the meantime? The Romans had maintained themselves for an amazing period of time by 'dividing in order to rule'. They didn't just divide tribe against tribe, but consciously developed trade of luxuries to rear a privileged elite among the tribes who were bought off, and so divided each tribe against itself.

As early as the first century A.D., Tacitus, after describing the democratic constitution of most of the tribes, moves on to the Suiones, a sea trading people:

"Wealth, too, is held in high honour; and so a single monarch rules with no restrictions on his power and with an unquestioned claim to obedience. Arms are not, as in the rest of Germany, allowed to all and sundry, but are kept in charge of a custodian who in fact is a slave...idle crowds of armed men easily get into mischief."

Since tribal society had no state, there was no possibility of preventing the young men from going out on raiding parties. We all know from cowboy films the problems the old chief of the Apaches has in explaining this principle to the Colonel of the Seventh Cavalry. But whereas the Red Indian resistance to capitalist conquest was doomed, raiding parties into the declining Roman empire could do very well for themselves.

Retinues built up around the boldest young men. These armed retinues were thus dependent on an individual and not on the will of the tribe. They were attached to their leader by gifts of booty. They were the beginning of the end for tribal society, for bit by bit they became a permanent armed aristocracy, and elevated their leader to king.

This military aristocracy expropriated the Roman landlords or merged with them as they entered the territory of the Roman empire.

It is not the purpose of this pamphlet to trace all the detailed shifts West European society went through in the next few centuries. But it is instructive to look at the most serious attempt to replace the lost lustre of the centralised Roman empire, the Frankish Empire of Charlemagne, and what happened to it.

Charlemagne conquered huge areas of Europe and set up provinces governed by counts. To provide food for the armies carrying out his conquests, the formerly free Frankish peasantry ('Frank' means free) were increasingly reduced to serf status.

These endeavours were greater than the productive resources of society could bear. Because productivity was low, communications were primitive. Under Charlemagne's successors the empire imploded, invaded by Normans, Vikings, and Saracens, and seemed on the point of collapse.

The local magnates seized their opportunity, setting up castles everywhere and becoming undisputed lords of the local villages, in return for defence of the land.

Charlemagne's successors had to accept the situation, granting land instead of gifts and accommodation to their

men at arms, and demanding acknowledgement of sovereignty and military service in return. It was a measure of the stage society was at that land was the main form of wealth—command over land gave access to the privileges of the surplus.

## Feudal society

Feudal society thus emerged in the form of a pyramid of military obligations to those above in exchange for command of the land to those below.

The whole structure relied on the unpaid labour of the peasants working on the lords' land. Unlike slaves, they were not the property of the lord. Feudalism developed untidily. Some in the village were in possession of very little land, and either existed still as slaves or as household servants working on the lord's land. Freer peasants had land to till and had to pay a rent in kind. Others had an intermediate status, working small plots to gain their own subsistence and forced to pay labour services the rest of the time, on the lord's land.

Exploitation under feudalism is clear and unveiled. The peasants pay services in money, labour or produce to the lords. Everyone can see what is going on. If the lord is in a position to force the peasant to work four days instead of three on his land, then it is clear to both parties that the rate of exploitation has been increased.

Under slavery, on the contrary, even the part of the working week which the slave has to work to gain his own subsistence seems to be unpaid. He therefore seems to work for nothing. Under capitalism, the wage worker is paid a sum of money which is presented as being the value of his labour. All labour seems to be paid.

*In all three systems the producer is exploited: but the particular form of exploitation ultimately determined the whole structure of society.*

Under feudalism the 'bodies of armed men' which comprised the state were mainly drawn from the ruling class, who had a monopoly of armed might. So political and economic power were in the same hands.

Justice in the village was largely in the hands of the lords' manorial courts. The feudal lord and his men-at-arms were police, judge, and executioners all rolled into one.

Looking back, we tend to regard feudalism as a static system. Compared to capitalism it undoubtedly was. But substantial advances were made under the stabilisation that feudalism provided.

For instance, the population of England probably doubled between 1066 and the fourteenth century—a mark of the advances in production. Large areas of forest and uncultivated land were put under plough for the first time. Huge regions of Eastern Europe were colonised by feudalism.

Feudalism provided a limited incentive for the producer to expand production for his own advantage. Sometimes the lord took the lead in developing agriculture or colonisation, sometimes the peasants. This depended on the class struggle. The tendency was for the lord to try to reduce the peasants' plots to a minimum, encroach on the common lands, and impose serf status. The peasants, on the other hand, were interested in reducing feudal dues to a minimum rent.

Innovations such as water- and wind-mills were introduced under the new system. The lord would attempt



to appropriate all the benefits of this advance by charging exorbitant fees for the use of his mill.

On the continent of Europe in the later middle ages, these 'banalities' were the main form of feudal revenue. Whether the incentive to produce more came from the lord's desire for more revenue for luxuries, or from the ambition of the peasants to set themselves up in business as independent farmers, production crept up.

But feudalism, like slavery before it, imposed limits on the development of productivity. From generation to generation agricultural productivity was largely stagnant. The easiest way for the feudal lords to gain more wealth was to exploit more people. There was therefore a perpetual impulse to warfare, the net effect of which was to waste and destroy the productive forces.

## Medieval towns

Like previous forms of class society, feudalism in its development produced the germs of a new society in the towns.

Roman towns had been much bigger and more impressive than the towns of the feudal middle ages, but they did not have the same possibilities for development. Roman cities started out as collections of landlords with an attendant trade in luxuries, and as administrative centres which fleeced the surrounding countryside. Medieval cities, on the other hand, were centres of trade and handicrafts.

As productivity developed, trade necessarily grew. Artisans, who had been attached to aristocratic households and monasteries in the dark ages, gathered together to trade with the rural areas in goods that could be produced quicker and therefore cheaper, or could only be produced by skilled specialists.

Whether these towns were originally established by the embryo of a new commercial class or by progressive feudal lords to exploit the new needs, they represented a new principle. Unlike the universal relations of dominance and subservience of feudalism, they were free associations of trading people, producing what one representative of the feudal lords called that "new and detestable name", the *commune*.

Within the towns production and trade was organised in guilds, divided on craft lines. These attempted to regulate production, price and quality.

After the Black Death (the terrible plague that spread across Europe in the fourteenth century) had bypassed Poland, the guilds decided to thank the Lord by celebrating more holy days. What they were actually doing, of course, was *sharing out the work* because of the reduction in custom.

The guilds began as bands of equals but, as towns grew in size due to the constant influx of refugee serfs looking for a better life, guild masters were able to make it more difficult for journeymen to join their ranks.

At the same time, merchant guilds were able to exploit their position over the artisan guilds to become an urban elite. Most towns were dominated by a tiny oligarchy, until a series of revolts by poor craftsmen to gain some say in the running of the council took place at the end of the middle ages.

Because of this natural differentiation produced anew by commodity production, the oligarchy in time regained their former status. At the same time all the towns

were engaged in battles for a charter of liberties from the landlord class.

As the productivity of labour grew, so did trade, and production for the market, commodity production, and a money economy. Increasingly, grain crops were produced for sale to feed the towns. A stratum of peasants grew rich at their fellows' expense, and aspired to become land-owning farmers producing for a market.

In England, though, it was mainly the feudal lords who took the initiative in reorienting production towards the market. Wool production became more important, and the lords would strive to grab the common lands and appropriate the peasantry.

Serfdom had largely died out in England by the end of the fourteenth century, but bondage to the soil was replaced by short-term leases and an increasing stream of poor peasants being pushed out altogether and forced into vagabondage (roaming the land in search of a living).

By the seventeenth century, it was reckoned that up to quarter of the population was without any means of livelihood other than begging. Progress, as ever, was achieved at the expense of the common people.

## Class struggle under feudalism

Whereas the class struggle between patricians and plebeians was political, concerned with access to state power, the feudal class struggle was mainly waged on the economic plane.

A constant, unremitting struggle took place between landlords and peasants. Occasionally this spilt over into revolutionary strife. The Peasants' Revolt of 1381 was the most notable such occasion in England.

After the Black Death, the peasants were in a strong position because of the shortage of labour. The landlords attempted to recoup their losses by enforcing traditional obligations all the harder. This produced a social explosion.

It is significant that the vanguard of the revolutionary peasantry was in the commercial crop areas of the south-east. The development of trade expanded communications and had the effect of binding people together over large areas. Though the revolt was unsuccessful in its immediate objectives, it had the effect of rolling back the predatory ambitions of the feudal lords.

The revolt failed at bottom because the peasantry were a scattered class divided against themselves. King Richard II urged them to "go back to their haymaking", and he hit them on their weak point. It was impossible to maintain the peasantry in a permanent state of mobilisation. Production had developed to a point where only a minority of the population could be maintained as fighting men, while the majority had to work on the land.

This point is illustrated by the Italian peasant revolt, led by Fra Dolcino at a similar time. Though dressed up in religious ideas, the advanced sections of the peasantry developed primitive communist aspirations.

Fra Dolcino and his followers retreated to the Italian Alps. They had to eat and they had to defend themselves. The beginnings of the split in their ranks between fighters and toilers produced demoralisation and defeat.

In this example we can see how the institutions of feudalism corresponded to the then existing state of the productive forces. The miseries of the past have been a



necessary travail for mankind.

## From feudalism to capitalism

Marx called the process of the dissolution of feudalism and emergence of capitalism "primitive accumulation". This process is one of piling up of fortunes in money rather than land on the one hand, and the creation of a propertyless proletariat on the other. It is the separation of the producers from the means by which they can maintain themselves.

We have seen that the feudal peasantry was attached to the land. This guaranteed them a modest subsistence except in times of famine.

Nobody will work for money, with all the insecurity that entails, unless they have to. That is why the imperialists in Africa introduced money poll taxes and, in the case of South Africa drove the Africans on to barren reserves, to force them to provide a supply of wage labour. That is why a monopoly of land in the hands of private owners is a condition for the development of capitalism.

The process by which the peasantry was dispossessed in England was described by Marx in *Capital*. The dissolution of the monasteries, when the church owned one-third of all land, produced an immense mass of ex-monastic paupers. Earlier, the disbandment of the feudal retinues after the Wars of the Roses produced a ferocious breed of vagabonds.

But the main lever of dispossession was the passing of private Acts of Parliament through a parliament of landlords, called Acts of Enclosure. This was simply legalised robbery. It came at a time when the wool trade was expanding, and the landlords wanted more land in order to graze flocks of sheep. Land formerly occupied by perhaps five hundred people was decreed to be the squire's land, and a couple of shepherds took the villagers' place.

Brutal as this process was, it advanced production on the land by doing away with the old inefficient strip system and laying the basis for rational agriculture. Later, the advantages of the industrial revolution—modern machinery—could be applied to these big farms.

The other pole of the process of primitive accumulation was the accumulation of money. The first forms of capital, before industrial capital transformed production, were merchant capital and money-lending capital.

The 'discovery' of America by Spanish plunderers shifted the axis of world trade. Huge fortunes were made in the 'New World'.

The Spanish search for gold was accompanied by the most horrible brutality. Under their rule the numbers of the Indians of San Dominge fell from a population of a million in 1492 to ten thousand in 1530. In Cuba the native population fell from 600 000 in 1492 to only 270 households in 1570.

The merchant capitalist powers outdid one another in their cruelty. Slavery, long thought dead, underwent a renaissance to provide labour for the mines and plantations to serve the world market.

At the same time, the late middle ages saw the rise of great banking families, such as the Fuggers, feeding the needs of the mighty for more and more money. Knights' and princes' feudal revenue could not keep up with the new luxuries available to them. This was clear evidence

that production relations on the land were a fetter on the development of the productive forces.

The monarchy too felt the need for more money and began to borrow. So this was the period when every nation began to run up its national debt, which is still with us today and currently standing in Britain at about £100 000 million.

At the end of the middle ages absolutist monarchs like the Tudors in England sprang up in most of the West European countries. These monarchies balanced between the old landed ruling class and the up-and-coming capitalists.

To start with they took society forward by forming strong, stable nation-states within which trade, and hence capitalism, could develop. They defended the interests of merchants abroad in wars of conquest for colonies.

Yet, at bottom, they were out for themselves, and could only flourish because of a deadlock in the class struggle between the capitalists and the landowners. As capitalism developed further, the rising capitalist class conceived ambitions for political power to match their growing economic power. *Bourgeois revolutions* aimed against the reigning absolute monarchs would become necessary for capitalism to consolidate its rule.

Developments parallel to those in agriculture took place in handicraft (manufacturing) production. We have seen how the guilds reflected production relations which originally institutionalised an *advance* in production. Later they became a *barrier*, as capitalists outside the guilds addressed themselves to mobilising wage labour to produce for the ever-increasing markets.

The guilds worked on the principle of limiting production to keep up prices, and used their traditional privileges to resist inroads. Merchant capitalists moved in to lap up the surplus labour of peasant households half-employed on tiny plots of land. They began to 'put out' weaving to these households.

The peasantry became more and more dependent on their weaving income. The merchants were able to move from just supplying raw materials and supplying sales outlets, to possession of the peasants' looms and even their cottages. Through their control over outlets they held the whip hand.

This was another important process whereby the feudal peasantry was reduced to proletarian status.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, handicraft workshops were set up. It was found that the job could be broken down into simple processes. Adam Smith begins his *Wealth of Nations* by explaining the division of labour in making pins, through which an enormous amount of pins could be cheaply produced compared with the old skilled processes.

More than that, the breaking down of the job into simple repetitive tasks provided the possibility of replacing manual labour with machines. Starting by taking production as it found it, capitalism was beginning to revolutionise the instruments of production.

Capitalism could not move straight into domination of the world economy without hindrance. The newly awakened productive forces were in revolt at the old relations of production. These had to be overcome and new production relations installed which corresponded to the stage of development of the productive forces.

This was the task of the bourgeois revolutions. The English revolution of the 1640s, the American revolution of 1776, and the French revolution of 1789-94 were the decisive struggles which laid the foundations for the



domination of capitalism on a world scale.

What precisely were the tasks of these bourgeois revolutions?

Though feudalism was no longer dominant, the landed interest remained a fetter on commodity production. Though in England the land-owning gentry switched to production for the market, in France up till 1789 the aristocracy guzzled a large part of the surplus in rents, and used their privileged position to impose all kinds of tolls on the free movement of goods.

This raised prices for everyone and enabled the bourgeoisie, in opposing the aristocracy, to claim to represent the interests of the nation as a whole. Up till the storming of the Bastille by the Parisian masses in 1789, for instance, food entering Paris was subject to a toll as a feudal privilege.

France was the classic country of the bourgeois revolution, where the old aristocracy was completely swept aside. The peasantry, increasingly producing for a market, had a tendency after the bourgeois revolution of 1789 to become divided into an aspiring capitalist class and a propertyless class of rural wage labourers.

Capitalism also had the task of setting up centralised national economies as an envelope within which the new mode of production could develop.

Germany as late as the nineteenth century showed the necessity for capitalist production to have a stable nation-state. Germany was still divided into thirty-six statelets on the eve of the 1848 revolution, each originally having its own currency, its own system of tolls and tariffs, its own weights, land measures and local communications.

Clearly this confusion of small states provided an almost impenetrable barrier to the development of large scale, all-German industry and trade. The failure of the German bourgeoisie to carry through "their own" revolution, because of their fear of the new working class behind them, led to these tasks being carried out under the hegemony of the Prussian *junkers* (landlords) around Bismarck—who saw the need to build a modern capitalist nation.

In Britain and France, on the other hand, national unification had already been substantially carried out by the absolutist monarchies as one of the progressive tasks of developing the framework of capitalist development.

Nor was the old aristocracy the only section to resist progress. A section of the capitalists, who had originally taken society forward, became increasingly reactionary. Rich merchants used their influence on the kings to gain monopolies in trade. They used their privileges to raise the price of commodities.

These reactionary capitalists were opposed by the smaller merchants, who were forced to fight for free trade, and by the urban masses. Likewise, big money-lenders made their money by lending to the crown, and thus were dependent on the monarchy.

The capitalist class as a whole was now strong enough to bid for political power, which it needed to complete its revolution. The absolutist monarchies, from being a shield to defend the expansion of trade, had become an obstacle. They had to be done away with; and the masses of artisans and yeomen were mobilised to do the job for the capitalist class.

## Capitalism

Capitalists measure their wealth not in land or slaves, but in money. The money fortunes found their way into production in the industrial revolution, a period as significant for mankind as the agricultural revolution thousands of years earlier.

Capitalism is a system of *exploitation* like feudalism or slavery. Its distinctive feature is that rather than just consuming the surplus, the capitalists are forced by the nature of their system to plough the bulk of it back into production.

Capitalism thus achieves a dynamic unheard-of in earlier epochs. Instead of just exploiting more people, as feudal lords strove to do through never-ending wars, capitalism exploits people more—it *develops the productivity of labour*.

In so doing it provides the *possibility* of a society of abundance, and so for doing away altogether with the division between exploiter and exploited. It provides, in other words, the possibility of a *higher stage* of society than capitalism itself.

Capitalism bases itself on the monopoly of the means of production in the hands of the ruling capitalist class. The vast majority of people are cut off from the means of life unless they work on terms dictated by the capitalist class.

Formally, wage workers seem to be paid for the work they do. In reality they are exploited as much as the feudal serf or the slave.

Under capitalism, labour-power (the capacity of the worker to labour) is a commodity like any other, in that it is bought and sold on the market. It is sold by its owner, the worker, and bought by the owner of money, the capitalist.

But labour-power is different from other commodities in this respect: it has the unique property of being able to *create value*. This is its usefulness to the capitalist; this is why the capitalist buys labour-power (employs workers).

As labour-power is consumed in production (as workers are put to work) value is created far in excess of what the capitalist has paid (as wages) for the labour-power. This is the source of the capitalist's profit.

If labour-power is to be available in the market place, so that the capitalist can buy it, labour-power must be *produced*. "Given the individual," Marx wrote, "the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself, or his maintenance". Marx adds immediately that this maintenance contains "a historical and moral element"—i.e., what a working-class family require for their maintenance, and for the raising of children as a new generation of wage-workers, will depend on standards of living which have been established through struggle as acceptable to the working class in that society.

The essence of capitalist exploitation is this: *The worker is paid wages not for his/her labour but for his/her labour-power—his/her keep*. The difference is taken by the capitalist.

Thus the worker's daily work is divided into "necessary labour" and "surplus labour". The worker performs "necessary labour" during that part of the day spent in producing value which, when sold, will cover the cost of the wages. The worker performs "surplus labour" dur-



ing the remainder of the working day, producing value which, when sold, will cover the rent, interest and profit which goes to the capitalist class.

Capitalism at first strove to increase the rate of exploitation through enforcing repeated increases in the working day (the workers were usually paid by the day, however many hours they worked). The capitalists were able to get away with this because of the almost endless *reserve army of labour* created by the destruction of petty production in town and country, and the driving of hordes of starving poor into the cities.

This meant that workers had to work on almost any terms dictated by the bosses. But the capitalist system was in danger of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Surveys undertaken in Britain during the 1850s showed a stunted, prematurely enfeebled race of workers unfit for military service.

In the nineteenth century British workers began the struggle for the legal limitation of the working day, what Marx called "the first victory for the political economy of the working class". We must note, though, that—like later reforms such as the National Health Service—the Ten Hours Act was also in the long-term interests of the ruling class because it maintained a labour supply in fit condition.

Nevertheless, because of the short-sighted greed of capitalists, these reforms were only enforced through struggle in the teeth of ruling-class opposition.

Thus, thwarted from indefinitely increasing the rate of surplus-value through what Marx called the extraction of *absolute surplus value* (e.g., by increasing the working day), the capitalists were forced to move to increasing the rate of exploitation through the extraction of *relative surplus-value*.

This means, instead of getting more hours of labour out of the workers, they had to raise the productivity of the workers' labour—to get more output from the same hours of work.

The more productive labour is, the less of the working day needs to be devoted to producing the value of the necessities of life for the workers (their wages), and the more time can be devoted to producing surplus for the capitalist.

The motor of capitalism is competition. Each capitalist has to undercut his competitors if he is to survive. The best way to sell cheaper is to produce cheaper. Since labour-time is the measure of value, that means producing with less labour-time.

Mechanising is the main means of continually raising the productivity of labour. Perhaps the best example of the process is the one supplied by Marx—the case of the hand-loom weavers.

The invention of the spinning jenny, and the mass-production of cheaper yarn, led to the mechanisation of cloth-making. Weaving, up to then, had still been a handicraft process. As demand for weavers expanded in the early years of the industrial revolution, the hand-loom weavers were able to bid up their wages and become a regular 'aristocracy of labour'. For capitalism they represented an obstacle to cheap production. Inevitably, as a result, the power loom was invented, for capitalist necessity is the mother and father of invention.

It would be quite clear to any casual observer that the power loom took much less labour-time to produce an equivalent amount of woven cloth.

In vain did the hand-loom weavers bid the price of their product down. In no way could they compete with the

power loom.

At their peak there had been a quarter of a million hand-loom weavers. Over a generation they were wiped out, with thousands actually dying of starvation. A much smaller number were able to get jobs, at lower rates of pay, supervising the power looms.

That has ever been the way with capitalist progress. But in this way capitalism has developed the fantastic productive powers of modern industry.

Capitalism also develops a form of the state appropriate to its own rule. Different forms of state can exist under capitalism, each corresponding to a different stage in the development of the class struggle—from parliamentary democracy to fascism and bonapartist military-police dictatorships of the most variegated kinds.

All these forms of state have one thing in common—in the last analysis they defend private property in the means of production, and therefore the rule of capital.

Marx and Engels often emphasised that democracy is the ideal form of capitalist class rule, first because it enables the capitalists to sort out their differences; and secondly because it gives the working-class parties a semblance of a say of running society. Changes necessary for the continued existence of the system can thus more easily be made.

At the same time bourgeois democracy provides the most favourable ground for the workers to organise to overthrow their exploiters.

Capitalism has required, as a precondition of its existence, a new class of propertyless toilers. Throughout its development capitalism has created a bigger and bigger pool of wage-workers.

Even since the Second World War, millions of small farmers have been driven from the land in countries such as France, Italy and Japan. This has been a progressive step in so far as it tears these people away from the isolation and backwardness of rural life, and in so far as it represents a raising of the productivity of labour, so that less people are needed to grow food and more can set their hands to producing other things.

But, at the same time, capitalism has no regard for the interests of people, and relentlessly searches out surplus value at any cost to the masses.

## The capitalist world market

As we have seen, though it has created misery for the masses, capitalism has been a dynamic system. Its aim and impulse is more and more surplus value.

Thus industrial capitalism strives to conquer the world. Merchant capital had contented itself with exacting tribute from the existing modes of production in other countries; industrial capital, in the empires it created after the industrial revolution, flooded these countries with cheap manufactured goods.

These goods necessarily destroyed the existing system of handicrafts, which was united with agriculture in the villages.

Existing societies were forcibly broken up. Moreover, agriculture was increasingly switched towards the requirements of the world market. Capitalism was beginning to create a world after its own image.

This process was brought to its highest stage in the imperialist phase of capitalist development.

The different phases through which capitalist countries



entered into relations with pre-capitalist nations—and, in exploiting them, drew them into the orbit of capitalism—can be seen clearly in the case of India.

In the first instance India was colonised not by the British government but by the East India Company, an association of merchants. They made fortunes for themselves by monopolising Anglo-Indian trade, buying cheap and selling dear. They also strove to grab the internal trade of India and under their greedy control the price of grain sky-rocketed during famines beyond the reach of the needy.

The period of domination of the East India Company corresponded to the requirements of primitive accumulation in Britain. Money fortunes were made by the merchant adventurers through unequal exchange. After the Battle of Plassey, which gave Britain sway over the entire Indian subcontinent, the Bank of England printed £10 and £15 notes for the first time. The conservative historian, Burke, estimated that plunder from India between 1757 and 1780 amounted to £40 million, a huge figure for that time.

British capitalism was not always the advocate of international free trade. That came later, when Britain had a monopoly of large-scale capitalist production. In fact, Indian textiles imported into Britain had duties of 70% to 80% imposed on them right up to about 1830.

It was only when the Lancashire machine textile industry had built up an unassailable position that restrictions were lifted because they were no longer necessary. The Indian market was then flooded with cheap cotton goods, and its own textile producers ruined.

The fate of Indian society was now bound up with the development of competitive capitalism. Incidentally, British capitalism did not hesitate to resort to the most barbarous methods of imposing their exports upon the Indians. For instance, the hands of weavers in Dacca were cut off! Terrible famine stalked the area, and the whole region became partly overgrown with jungle.

In 1850 India absorbed one quarter of Lancashire textiles.

After the Indian Mutiny, which began in 1857, the British rulers saw the need to build up a network of railways, to allow rapid troop movements, in order to keep the population pinned down. This marked the beginning of the third phase of the exploitation of India. Export of capital rather than of goods became the predominant feature.

## Imperialism

This development was the result of the growth of monopoly capitalism in the metropolitan countries, involving the fusion of finance with manufacturing capital—the epoch of *imperialism*, which was analysed by Lenin. National markets became too small for the giant monopolies as they swallowed up their weaker competitors, expanded production to new heights, and looked for new and profitable areas for investment.

In the case of India, this process really got going at the end of the nineteenth century when capital was exported from Britain to build up a modern Indian-based textile industry, mainly under British ownership.

“One capitalist kills many”, as Marx says. Capitalism destroys not only petty production, but also continually

bankrupts the weakest of its own brethren and jettisons them into the ranks of the propertyless.

This is a two-sided process—progressive in its objective economic content, by piling up enormous productive resources for the potential benefit of mankind: but, under capitalism, concentrating colossal power in the hands of a tiny handful of rich magnates.

At the end of the nineteenth century we saw the development of monopoly out of competition itself.

The banking system, Marx wrote, “places all the available and even potential capital of society that is not already actively employed at the disposal of the industrial and commercial capitalists, so that neither the lenders nor users of this capital are its real owners or producers. It thus does away with the private character of capital and thus contains in itself, but only in itself, the abolition of capital itself... Finally there is no doubt that the credit system will serve as a powerful lever during the transition from the capitalist mode of production to the mode of production of associated labour, but only as one element in connection with other great organic revolutions of the mode of production itself.”

Capitalism continually requires infusions of money capital in order for profit-making to continue uninterrupted. Once a stock of commodities has been produced, a single capitalist would either have to wait till he had sold them before he once again had money in his pocket to restart production; or he would have to keep stocks of money-capital idle much of the time as a reserve for investment when needed; he would have to continually pay money into a fund to renew stocks of fixed capital *which might be idle for ten or twenty years*.

In reality, a stratum of capitalist hangers-on develop, not prepared to invest directly in production, but quite prepared to lend their money in order to cut themselves a slice of the pie of surplus-value. So there is a tendency for competition to generate unused reserves of money capital. These reserves are collected in a few rich hands—concentrations of *finance capital*.

Finance capital initially provided a stimulus to the capitalist system by gathering and syphoning money-capital into production. It did so, of course, only to cream off an increasing proportion of the surplus value for itself.

As Marx pointed out, finance capital also concentrates tremendous economic power in its own hands, and effectively integrates the individual manufacturing capitalist into the requirements of capitalist production as a whole through allocation and withdrawal of credits.

Imperialism is the epoch in which finance capital has fused with monopoly capital involved in production.

Under imperialism, while competition between capitalists within the boundaries of the nation-state has not been completely done away with, conflict has spilt over into the international arena.

The big monopolies and the banks exported capital rather than just commodities. A massive programme of railway building was undertaken in every continent and clime. Loans were floated for the most far-flung places. A systematic search was undertaken for every kind of raw material and mineral resource.

Conflicts now began between national capital blocs. The struggle was for nothing less than mastery of the world. Wars unparalleled in ferocity in the history of mankind broke out for colonies and a redivision of imperial spoils.

The First World War indicated that capitalism, like



previous forms of class society, had ceased to be progressive. Instead of taking production forward, there was mass destruction and mass murder.

But at the same time, a new society was developing within the old. The Russian revolution served notice that the rule of the working class was at hand.

## Revolutionary role of working class

The working class is unlike any other exploited class in history. We have seen how the three-sided class struggle within slave society necessarily led to the "common ruin of the contending classes". We have seen how the feudal peasantry were for hundreds of years incapable of formulating a coherent revolutionary alternative to the system that exploited them.

This failure had not been accidental. The peasantry is an isolated class, scattered over the countryside and finding it very difficult to combine. But their problem is not just geographical, it is at bottom social. For as Marx put it, the peasantry is a class only in one sense:

"in so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their mode of life, their interests and their culture from those of the other classes, and put them in hostile opposition to the latter, they form a class. In so far as...the identity of their interests begets no community, no national bond and no political organisation among them, they do not form a class."

For the peasantry are smallholders—a class divided against itself. They are like potatoes in a sack—destined for the chipping machine under capitalist progress.

The working class, on the other hand, is concentrated in great masses by the very nature of factory production. Unlike the peasantry, their only strength lies in collective action. Through collective exploitation, the working class are trained and educated by capitalism itself to act as the system's grave-diggers.

## Capitalist crisis

Nor is the modern working class left to vegetate at a modest but constant standard of living. Insecurity is a condition of their existence.

Capitalism has produced many wonders inconceivable hitherto. It has also produced social disasters inconceivable under previous forms of society—crises taking the form of *overproduction*.

In pre-capitalist societies, the subsistence of the toilers was only interrupted by famine—physical shortage of necessities. Primitive people's minds may well have been clogged with all sorts of superstition, but the spectacle of people starving, while sitting idly in front of the tools necessary to make the things they need, is a unique product of our society.

Capitalism is *social* production. It is social in two ways. Firstly, it ties the whole world up into one economic unit through the world market, a worldwide division of labour. Everybody is dependent on everyone else for the things they need.

Secondly it introduces large scale production only workable by collective labour.

Yet, at the same time, the system runs on *private* appropriation and *private profit*. It is anarchic—nobody knows how much of any commodity is needed at any time. The capitalist plans production within his own factory, but social production as a whole is *unplanned*.

Marx wrote: "Capitalist production seeks continually to overcome these immanent barriers but overcomes them only by means which again place the barriers in its way and on a more formidable scale. The real barrier of capitalist production is capital itself". (*Capital* Vol. 3)

"The same bourgeois mind which praises division of labour in the workshop, life-long annexation of the labourer to a partial operation and his complete subjection to capital, as being an organisation of labour that increases its productiveness—that same bourgeois mind denounces with equal vigour every conscious attempt to socially control and regulate the process of production, as an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and unrestricted play for the bent of the individual capitalist. It is very characteristic that the enthusiastic apologists of the factory system have nothing more damning to urge against a general organisation of the labour of society than that it would turn all society into one immense factory". (*Capital* Vol.1)

How is 'overproduction' possible? The reason people can't just walk into the factories, and start producing the things they want, is because they don't own those factories: and the state defends the property interests of the ruling class.

The ruling class, for their part, produce only to make profit. No profit, no jobs.

Every worker laid off by one capitalist means one less consumer for another capitalist's goods. So crisis, triggered off in any one major sector of the economy, can radiate throughout the system.

Crises of mass unemployment are as much a creation of capitalism as Coca Cola.

The laws of capitalism work, "despite anarchy, in and through anarchy". Each capitalist is oblivious to the actual requirements of society for pig-iron or knicker elastic at any time. They produce what they hope will make the maximum profit, whether pig-iron or knicker-elastic. They organise production within their factory; but anarchy reigns in production as a whole.

The possibility of crisis is inherent in such a system. All that socialists want to do is plan production in society at large in the same meticulous way the capitalists do within each separate factory.

The worker, unlike the exploited classes in pre-capitalist society, is a free person—free in that he is not subject to "relations of personal dependence" and can work for any boss he likes, and free from any attachment to the means of subsistence. But the workers' expectations and feelings of security are continually shattered by plagues of mass unemployment.

Crisis poses over and over again before the working class the need to change society. Capitalism will never collapse of its own accord. It has to be overthrown.

It is a caricature of Marxism to suggest that the revolution will be made automatically by workers made destitute by the workings of the system. It will be overthrown by a *conscious and determined class*, not just by a desperate class.

What is true is that the perpetual insecurity of existence under capitalism will produce a questioning in the minds of workers. Just as we have to understand nature in order to master it, so workers will have to understand the nature



of their enemy before they can overthrow it.

That is why we are producing this pamphlet.

We have outlined the progress of mankind from primitive communism to capitalism. An objective look at the record shows also the world we have lost. Chief Sitting Bull, an outstanding defender of Red Indian tribal society, ended up miserably as a kind of freak in Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. As he toured the Western capitals he was astounded at the wealth—but also at the poverty. He said, "The white man (by which he meant the capitalist system) knows how to produce wealth, not how to distribute it".

Yet the possibility now exists for a society where enough can be produced for each to take according to their need. The possibilities posed before mankind by science and new technology were foreseen by Marx over 120 years ago. In one of his notebooks he wrote:

"No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing as middle link between the object and himself; rather he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and unorganic nature mastering it. In this transformation it is...the development of the social individual which appears as the great foundation-stone of production and

of wealth. The theft of alien labour-time, on which the present is based, appears a miserable foundation in face of this new one, created by large-scale industry itself...

"The surplus labour of the mass has ceased to be the condition for the development of general wealth, just as the non-labour of the few, for the development of the human head... The free development of individuals and hence...the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc., development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them." (*Grundrisse*)

The !Kung people in the Kalahari live lives of material want and intellectual backwardness by our standards, but they know better than to make labour for others the driving force of their society. In consequence they work a week of between 12 and 19 hours!

Now mankind has the resources and technical means to reach a society of abundance. The working class, organised and conscious, can overthrow capitalism and create such a society—a society where people can plan what they need and want, produce it, and then spend the rest of the time enjoying it. It's as simple as that.