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Stalin's Meeting about Political Economy textbook,
30 May 1950

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Summary:

Meeting about Political economy. Discussions on political economy and book pending publication.

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Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

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[A little over a month later, Stalin again met with the authors of the textbook for about an hour. Rather than shifting his attention to socialism, Stalin offered detailed criticism of the section of the book on feudalism. He also remained concerned about the tone of the book ("you've approached writing about feudalism like it was hackwork") and the use of Marx and Lenin. The minutes were compiled from notes by Leont'ev, Ostrovitianov, and Ivan Danilovich Laptev. The words in parentheses were spoken by the authors of the textbook.]

[Stalin:] How do you intend to present the text on pre-monopoly capitalism? By chapters?

In separate chapters nothing will be accomplished. A general picture is needed. That is why I asked you to present all the chapters immediately. It is impossible to review an isolated chapter. It is necessary to present pre-monopoly capitalism as a whole and also to give a summary of the corresponding economic conditions by presenting the criticism that Marx gave of earlier political economy.

In the plan of the section on pre-monopoly capitalism how do you propose to describe primitive accumulation--in a separate chapter?

(Answer: No, that goes in the chapter on the rise of capitalism.)

[Stalin:] You plan to describe the question of "merchant capital and profit from trade" only in chapter XIII, after which, the characteristics of industrial capital are given. This is historically incorrect. The analysis of merchant capital should be in front. I would place the theme of merchant capital before the appearance of the capitalist mode of production. Merchant capital precedes industrial capital. Merchant capital stimulates the beginnings of manufacturing.

(Comment: We plan to look at merchant capital and profit from trade in the chapters on the allocation of increased cost during capitalism. In the chapter on feudalism we plan on writing about the role of merchant capital only in that period.)

Then the heading is not successful. Call the chapter "Profit from Trade." Otherwise, people could think that merchant capital only appears in the period of mechanized industry and this is historically incorrect.

In the textbook in general the historical method is missing. In the introduction you say that the description will be based on the historical method, but you yourselves avoid it. The historical method is needed in this textbook; it is impossible without it. None of you understands why merchant capital is placed after the description of the machine period of capitalism.

You don't correctly use the section on feudalism. It is a bizarre, popular section that is written as if a grandfather were telling a story to children. In this section, everything comes out of nowhere: feudal lords appear, trade appears, and buyers, [appear] like puppets on the stage.

Imagine the audience for whom you are writing. Don't imagine beginners. Instead keep in mind people who have finished eighth to tenth grade. You explain such words as "regulation." But you think that this will not be understood without an explanation. The tone is incorrect, you describe things like you are telling fairy tales.

In the chapter on feudalism you write that the town split with the countryside again. The first time the town broke off from the countryside was in slave-owning society and the second time was during feudalism. This is nonsense. It is as if the towns died along with slavery. The towns began during slavery. During the feudal period the towns remained. It is true that at first the towns developed weakly, but then they grew strong. The difference between town and country remained. Trade developed in connection with the discovery of America and the spread of markets in towns. Wealth was gathered.

In the chapter on feudalism the discovery of America is not mentioned. Very little is said about Russia. More needs to be said about Russia, beginning with feudalism. In the chapter on feudalism it is necessary to show the feudal period in Russia, right up to the abolition of serfdom.

During feudalism there were many major cities such as Genoa, Venice and Florence. During feudalism trade reached a large scale. Florence was three steps ahead of ancient Rome.

During slave building major cities and large-scale production appeared. So long as there were slave labor and cheap labor, there could be large-scale production and large landed estates. As soon as slave labor disappeared, large-scale production and landed estates began to split up. City life as it had been ceased to exist. But the cities remained and survived. Trade went on, ships sailed with 150 oars.

In some histories it seems like the middle ages represent a degradation in relation to the slave system and that there was no movement forward. But this is incorrect.

In the chapter on feudalism you did not even say which kinds of work formed the basis of feudal society. But you need to show that in the ancient world slave labor was the basis and during feudalism it was peasant [labor].

When the major landed estates of slave building split up and slavery fell, there were no more slaves, but peasants remained. During slavery there were peasants, but they were few in number and they were under the constant threat of becoming slaves. The Roman Empire fought the so-called "barbarian" tribes. Feudalism appeared when two societies clashed: on the one side was the Roman Empire and on the other side were the "barbarian" tribes, which fought against Rome. You have avoided this question. You don't even mention the "barbarian" tribes. Who were in these tribes? They were Germans, Slavs, Gauls and others. These tribes fought with Rome and had a communal system. This was especially strong among Germans with their marks.[1] Rural society began to struggle with things that remained from the Roman slave society, from the Roman Empire. The Roman Empire showed great hardiness. At first it split up into two parts: the western and the eastern empires. Later, as the Western Roman Empire died, the Eastern Roman Empire remained for a long time.

It should be clearly and precisely stated that during feudalism the main foundation for the existence of society became peasant labor.

We always say that capitalism germinated in the depths of feudalism. This is absolutely undebatable and we need to show historically how that took place. [In reading this] one doesn't feel how capitalism germinated in the depths of feudalism. You do not have the discovery of America. But the discovery of America happened in the middle ages, before the bourgeois revolution. They were seeking a sea route to India, and came across a new continent. But this is not what is essential. It is important that trade increased to a great extent and the market expanded. That is how the conditions were created in which the first capitalist-manufacturers were able to break the guild system. A great demand for goods appeared and manufacturing

grew in order to satisfy that demand. That is how capitalism appeared. All of that is missing from the chapter on the feudal system.

Writing a textbook is not a simple affair. You need to ponder history more. You've approached writing about feudalism like it was hackwork. You are used to reading your lectures that way, chip-chop. They listen to you then and no one criticizes.

The textbook is intended for millions of people. It will be read and studied not only here, but all over the world. It will be read by Americans and Chinese, and it will be studied in all countries. You need to keep in mind a more qualified audience.

The slave system was the first class society. This was the most interesting society prior to capitalism. The plague of class-based society was pushed to the limit in the slave system. Now, when capitalism is getting in a tight spot it turns to the ways of slavery. In the ancient world, wars were conducted to get slaves. But in our time Hitler made war in order to enslave other peoples, especially the people of the Soviet Union. This was also a campaign for people. Hitler gathered slaves everywhere. Hitler brought millions of foreign workers to Germany, including Italians, Bulgarians and people of other countries. He wanted to restore slavery. But he wasn't able to. The conclusion is that when capitalism sours, it turns to the old and the most savage slave methods.

Bourgeois textbooks harmoniously hold forth about democratic movements in ancient times and praise "the Golden Age of Pericles." We need to show that democracy in the slave world was the democracy of slavery.

I implore you to conduct your work on the textbook seriously. If you don't know the material, study books, sources, ask whomever you need to. Everyone will read the textbook. It will be a model for everyone.

You need to rewrite the chapter on the feudal system. You need to show how the feudal system came about. The slaveholding elite were removed. Slavery collapsed. The land remained, trade remained, colonies remained, as did peasant labor. Towns remained. They flourished to the end of the middle ages.

It follows that the capitalist period should begin with the bourgeois revolution in England, in France and with the peasant reforms in Russia. Before that time, capitalism had foundations in the midst of feudalism. The better material on the beginnings of capitalism should be transferred to the chapter on feudalism.

The role and meaning of state power during feudalism has to be shown. When the Roman Empire no longer existed, power, like economic activities, was decentralized. Feudal lords fought with one another. Small principalities formed. State power became fictitious. Every landowner had his own excise tax. Power needed to be centralized. Later it gathered real power when the national state was formed on the bases of emerging national markets. The development of trade required a national market. And you don't have a word about the national market. Feudalism interfered with trade. They encompassed different customs and tariffs. You need to say succinctly a word or two about all of that.

Feudal society is closer to us--it was yesterday. In the chapter it is worth talking about Russia, the peasant reforms, how the peasants were freed, with the land or without it. The landowners were scared that the peasants would be freed from below, therefore the state undertook reform from above. For us, the serf system ended with the moment of peasant reform; in France it was the bourgeois revolution.

The chapter gives the correct description. But everything is scattered and not collected. There is no consistency. The very foundation is not stated: work served as the foundation of the feudal system.

A quotation from Il'ich is used to show that the serf system was maintained with the discipline of the stick. That quote is taken out of context. Lenin gave a lot of attention to the economic side of the question. It is impossible to keep people under control by using a stick for 600-700 years. The important thing is not the stick, but that the land belonged to the landlords. The land was the base, and the stick was extra. You use quotations from Marx and Lenin without thinking about what kind of connection they have with one or another meaning.

Don't skimp in terms of the economic viewpoint. Familiarizing oneself with this view, the reader gets a more concrete picture of the epoch. You need to talk about mercantilism, about Colbert.[2] Colbert lowered the tariffs within the country, but he closed off the state with high external tariffs in order to widen the development of manufacturing and the development of capital. Mercantilism preceded the bourgeois revolution.

I needed to make a comment and write a page for you on the democratic movements in Greece and Rome. In the chapter on slavery there was no criticism of the bourgeois view of the democratic movements in Greece and Rome. This movement does not just appear in bourgeois literature, but even in some of our books. The French revolutionaries cursed the name Gracchi.[3]

You need to present the material using the historical method, since you took up this work.

It is not advisable to use bizarre propaganda and popularizing language; it will seem like some grandfather telling fairy tales.

In your account the towns are separated from the country two times. They were separate, remained separate, and then for no reason separate again. The old town, during the slave-owning system, was not broken from the countryside. Some towns developed separately from the countryside at the end of the middle ages. It is enough to remember towns like Venice, Florence. Remember Hansa. What trade was like in those towns, what ships! Trade capital played a big role. Kings found themselves dependent on strong merchants.

Venice occupied Constantinople. They went to war and fought. The trade areas developed powerfully. In the depths of feudalism a trading class grew strong. This class dislodged a big percent. In the ancient world there were two major money lenders: one was a Hittite whose name I don't remember, and one was a Phoenician by the name of Khammurabi.[4] They had a lot of money and they even loaned it to the state. But in comparison with the Fuggers[5] they both were worth nothing.

(Question: In connection with your instructions, would it not be appropriate to put part of the question of commodities in the section on feudalism, as it was in the draft?)

[Stalin:] Of course, it is better to talk about commodities and about different elements of goods in the chapter on feudalism. But the problems with commodities as a whole should go in the section on capitalism. Because we agreed to follow the historical method.

Marx followed a different method. He puts commodities at the beginning, as an economic unit of capitalism and he studies it from all sides by turning it on all sides. But you give the question of commodities separately. In the chapter on capitalism

take the whole thing. It will be easier to master. You need to examine separate elements to present a theory of commodities, to measure the appearance of corresponding relations.

(Question: In as much as we present an economic study of the period of pre-monopoly capitalism, how should we understand Lenin's work? Where should we put that work?)

[Stalin:] In the chapter on pre-monopoly capitalism it is worth using Lenin's work up to the appearance of his book on imperialism, or to be more exact, to the appearance of his article against Trotsky "On the Slogan of the United States of Europe." [6] Then use new economic studies about the period known as free capitalism, when different countries slowly agreed with each other not to take over more territory. Then the new period began--the period of monopoly capitalism. In that sense, the description of Lenin's views can be broken into two parts.

The ideology of capitalism in the pre-monopoly period is completely different from the monopoly period. At that time some bourgeoisie praised feudalism, spoke of freedom, and praised liberalism. It looks completely different during imperialism, when the ideology of capitalism abandoned various vestiges of liberalism and assumed the most reactionary views of the previous periods. This, then, is a different ideology.

(Question: We also struggled with this question: in the section on pre-monopoly capitalism we touch on a series of themes, such as land rent, which don't come up in the section about imperialism. Here, can we use concrete facts relating to modern capitalism?)

[Stalin:] Of course you can, since imperialism is also capitalism.

(Question: In the chapter on the machine period, is it necessary to limit discussion to the steam engine, as Marx does, or show its further development into the internal combustion engine and electricity without which there is no machine system?)

[Stalin:] Of course, it is necessary to talk about the machine system. Marx wrote in the 1860s, and since then technology has moved forward.

It will be necessary to increase the chapter on feudalism by about 15-20 pages.

(Question: Should we make two chapters: 1) on the main features of the feudal mode of production and 2) the end of the feudal mode of productions?)

[Stalin:] Decide that yourself as you find necessary. The chapter on feudalism should be redone along the lines of the plan by which the chapter on slavery was written.

In the chapter on feudalism it is worth remembering the "barbarian" tribes' economic system. You need to show what happened when the so-called barbarian tribes met slave-holding Rome.

In the beginning, feudalism did not force the peasants into serfdom, but then that happened. You need to show how serf relations took shape. Perhaps it is worth dividing feudalism into two sections: early and late.

Don't blabber too much about manufacturing. This is not the most interesting period of capitalism. In manufacturing the technology was old. In factual terms it was nothing other than expanding crafts. Machines gave a new quality. Say less about manufacturing, don't become too engrossed. The machine period changed

everything.

A one month period is not enough to write the chapter on pre-monopoly capitalism. I think that work on the textbook will take all of this year. Maybe a little of the next year will be needed. This is very serious work.

We think the names of all the members of the committee and "Approved by the Central Committee of the Communist Party" should be put on the textbook.

1 German rural community.

2 Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619-1683), a French politician who served as an adviser to Louis XIV.

3 Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus and Caius Sempronius Gracchus, brothers, Roman statesmen and social reformers. Both were killed following efforts at reform in the second century B.C.

4 Stalin may have been referring to the Phoenician king of Tyre Hiram who assisted the Israelite kings David and Solomon in exchange for tribute and territory.

5 Johannes Fugger (1348-1409) and his son Jacob, German financiers who exerted considerable economic and political influence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

6 Stalin is referring to Lenin's 23 August 1915 article "On the Slogan of the United States of Europe." See Lenin's Collected Works, Vol. 21 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965), pp. 339-343.