

## INSTITUTE RESOURCE PAPER #5: REVOLUTIONARIES – THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

"Social man creates his own, i.e., social, relations. But if he creates certain relations, and not others, in a definite period, then that does not of course take place without cause; it is determined by the state of the productive forces.... He is a hero, not in the sense that he can halt or change the natural course of things, but in the sense that his activities are the conscious and free expression of that necessary and unconscious course. Therein lie all his significance, all his power. But it is a vast significance and an awesome power."

George Plekhanov, "The Role of the Individual in History"

The purpose of this class is to see how revolutionaries can master their tasks and most effectively play their decisive role in history. The conclusion is that the most revolutionary thing to do today is to make millions clear about the economic transformation of society and their role in fighting for its reconstruction.

### INTRODUCTION OF THE QUESTION

The role of revolutionaries rests on the relation between the objective and subjective elements of a process. We should bear in mind that the process you are dealing with defines the relationship between its objective and subject aspects. For example, in the transformation of society as a whole, the objective forces are the constant changes in how things are produced; the subjective forces are the religious, political, literary, philosophical, moral and other ideological forms in which the transformation of society is fought out. In regards to the tasks of revolutionaries, the objective elements include the

entire economic, social and political process they are working in; the subjective element is the conscious and planned work of revolutionaries. Objective circumstances define both the limitations and the power of an individual who takes up a cause or embarks on a mission.

## WHAT IS "FREEDOM"?

Engels and Hegel defined "freedom" (in the sense of the freedom of an individual to get done what he or she is trying to do) in similar ways. Hegel pointed out that "necessity is blind only in so far as it is not understood," or that freedom is the appreciation of necessity. Engels could further develop that understanding because he put the problem on a materialist basis. He placed the conscious individual in proper relation to the objective environment in which he or she is operating. He emphasized that "freedom does not consist in the dream of independence of natural laws, but in the knowledge of these laws, and in the possibility this gives of systematically making them work towards definite ends.... Freedom of the will therefore means nothing but the capacity to make decisions with real knowledge of the subject."

In other words, the more you master the "necessity," that is, the laws of development of the process you're dealing with, the "freer" you are to exercise some control or "will" in relation to that process and to exert some influence.

Identifying the relation between the objective and the subjective aspects is the first step. Then you can see what you can influence and what you can't, what objective forces you can harness to accomplish your goals, etc.

You also have to get a picture of its motion: what it is and what it is in the process of becoming, the stages of the process, and what stage it is going through at any given time. Then you can assess what you have to do at this stage in order to accomplish your goals; on that basis you can make plans and accomplish political tasks.

## WHAT FREEDOM IS POSSIBLE TODAY?

When we apply this concept of freedom to humanity's relation to the rest of nature, then we can see that freedom is also a product of historical development. Over the generations, the general body of knowledge of the laws of development of nature grows and expands. Humanity's freedom in relation to its natural environment is a product of this knowledge and the level of technological development.

In this sense, Engels pointed out the significance of the conquest of fire. With the mastery of fire (that is, the discovery that mechanical motion can be transformed into heat), humans began to separate themselves from the animal kingdom. Until that discovery of fire, humans were as unfree as animals in that they had no knowledge of the laws of development of nature, no control whatsoever over nature, and no way to progress. With the mastery of fire, human society began to take shape and evolve as a way to care for one another and the future generations. Fire laid the basis for other important discoveries, including, thousands of generations later, the discovery that by turning water into steam, heat could, in turn, generate mechanical motion. Hence the development of the steam engine whose productive power called for the reorganization of society and laid the basis for wars and revolutions throughout the world. But Engels noted that the invention of the steam engine could not bring about such a mighty leap forward in human development as the mastery of fire did. He pointed out how young human history is and anticipated discoveries even greater than those of his generation.

Could it be that the technological development at the command of our generation puts humanity on the verge of a qualitatively new "freedom"? With the mastery of fire, humanity began to distinguish itself from the rest of animal kingdom. Later, with the invention of the steam engine, humanity saw the possibility not only of a freedom from class distinctions, but also of an existence in harmony with the laws of nature. With the development of labor-replacing technology -- and more important, the knowledge that makes that possible -- the prospect of freedom from the dog-eat-dog, survival-of-the-fittest laws of the animal kingdom is within sight. Humanity has the wherewithal to fully ensure the intellectual, cultural, emotional, and spiritual lives of all. The possibilities of humanity realizing its full potential are astonishing.

## WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE INDIVIDUAL IN HISTORY?

This question is important to revolutionaries. The answer points to the decisive role of thousands and millions of people acting consciously in the interests of humanity, as well as to the role of the relatively few who step out first to answer the call of history. The history of our country is rich with tales of sacrifice and heroism that answer the question.

Thomas Paine, for example, came to the American colonies from Britain in 1774. Hostilities between the colonists and the British broke out a few months later, but the idea of independence still had not caught on. Paine himself said, "I viewed the dispute as a kind of lawsuit.... I had no thoughts of independence or of arms.... But when the country, into which I had just set my foot, was set on fire about my ears, it was time to stir." The objective basis for independence matured through a complex of economic and political events resting on both the growing dependence of Britain on the colonies and a growing economic strength of America. Thomas Paine, a corset maker who had only recently come to America, wrote *Common Sense*, the pamphlet that articulated the cause of independence and stirred all of America to the revolutionary cause. The war had already begun, but the American people had not yet rallied to the cause of independence. Paine, more than anyone else, awakened the American people to that cause. A committed individual made a big impact on history because he won people to the cause for which objective conditions demanded it was time to fight.

Some philosophers acknowledge the roles of both objective forces and conscious people in making history, but they fail to put them in their proper dialectical relation. These philosophers treat both as "factors" in history, but they still leave us without a clue as to how history is made.

Plekhanov puts the individual (as the subjective element) and the laws of development of society (as the objective element) into dialectical relation so we can see how the process unfolds. The thesis is the laws of development of social progress. The antithesis is the conscious or talented or committed individual who is in a position to perform a role demanded by history as it progresses according to its objective laws. The synthesis is the making of history. People make history, but they do so under definite historical conditions, at certain points and along the lines in which history is marching. The

individual's "activities are the conscious and free expression of that necessary and unconscious course."

The individual -- and people in general -- play an important role in history because of how societies develop and change. Changes in the way things are produced call for changes in the way society is organized. But institutions that reflect and protect the old order in society -- and the people who benefit from it -- resist the change from old to new. New and old methods of production can't fight out this transformation directly. People fight it out. And they fight it out in various political, religious, legal, cultural, and other ideological forms.

Philosophers have also posed the question: Once the development of the productive forces has determined the general cause of the historical progress of humanity, does the conscious individual have any role to play? We would answer that it is precisely the time when the objective basis for a leap forward in society's development has been set that the individuals must play their role.

A look at the Freedom Movement in this country should prove that not only do the combatants fight out the transformation in society, but their personal qualities and the specifics of the combatants on all sides shape the features of how history is made. The invention of the mechanical cotton picker and chemical weed killers compelled changes in southern society because manual labor on the land was no longer in such great demand. Segregation (whose purpose was to forcibly keep black people on the land) was no longer necessary. But if it hadn't been for the sacrifice, wisdom and heroism of the thousands of people fighting for freedom, this country may not have been won to the support of their cause. Segregation may have ended, but the consciousness of freedom and civil rights would not play the same role in the political psychology of this country. Or if, by earlier turns of history, the federal government had not been destined to play such a role of abdication and betrayal in relation to the Freedom Movement, things would have taken still a different turn. Or if the beatings, bombings, murders and betrayals had stopped the local people in the rural South and they had left the fight to the celebrated names, then the outcome may have taken still a different form.

If an individual possesses and gives back to humanity something that will push forward what humanity is striving to do at a given moment, then that individual can be considered a hero. History needs and calls forth millions of heroes.

All this is to say that what is inevitable is not necessarily automatic. Objective elements set the conditions for change; people fight out these changes and shape the ways in which they come about.

### WHAT MUST REVOLUTIONARIES DO?

The most revolutionary and truly liberating role we can play today is to bring to the millions of Americans a vision of the freedom that historical development has made possible and their role in rebuilding society on new foundations. Revolutionaries today set out to fulfill this decisive role with a passion for achieving what science and history have made possible.

For discussion questions and readings, see [Unit VII of the Institute-in-a-Box, "Revolutionaries - The Role of the Individual."](#)

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