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Notes from L.A. Leont'ev's April 1950 Meeting with Stalin, Regarding Political Economy Textbook

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Summary:

Stalin voices his displeasure over the political economy textbook. He urges the authors to study Marx in greater depth, yet to also make the text simple. Stalin stresses the importance of the Soviet Union having a political economy textbook.

Original Language:

Russian

Contents:

Translation - English

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[Stalin:] I want to make some critical comments about the new draft of the political economy textbook.

I read around 100 pages addressing pre-capitalist formation and capitalism. I looked a little at the section on "socialism." I'll talk about socialism another time. Today I want to note some shortcomings related to the sections on capitalism and precapitalist formation. The work of the committee has gone along an incorrect path. I said that you should take the first version of the draft as a basis. But you clearly understood that to mean that the textbook was not in need of any major revisions. This is not true. It requires very serious corrections.

The first and most important shortcoming of the textbook is the exposure of a complete misunderstanding of Marxism. This is clear from the incorrect description of manufacturing and machine periods of capitalism. The section on the manufacturing period of capitalism is blown up, it is given 10 pages, which is more than the machine period. The machine period of capitalism is missing from the textbook. It disappeared. The machine period is not given its own chapter. It is given some pages in the chapter on "Capital and Surplus Value." Take Marx's Capital. In Capital the manufacturing period of capitalism takes up 28 pages, but the machine period is given a large chapter of 110 pages. Plus, in other chapters Marx talks a lot about the machine period of capitalism. Such a Marxist as Lenin in his work on the Development of Capitalism in Russia gave central attention to the machine period. Without machines there is no capitalism. Machines are the foundation of the revolutionary power that transformed society. The textbook does not show what the machine system is; there is exactly one word about the machine system. Therefore the whole picture of the development of capitalism is distorted.

Manufacturing relied on handicraft and hand labor. The machine replaced hand work. Machine production--this is large-scale production and the basis of the machine system.

You need to keep in mind that our cadres and our young are people who have seven to ten years of education. They are interested in everything. They can look at Marx's Capital, at Lenin's work, and ask: Why is this described differently than in Marx and Lenin? This is the main shortcoming. You need to describe the history of capitalism as Marx and Lenin did. In the textbook a special chapter on the machine period is necessary, but the chapter on manufacturing should be removed.

The second major shortcoming in the textbook comes from the fact that there is no analysis of wages. The major questions are not addressed. The section on pre-monopoly capitalism gives a description of wages along the lines of Marx's description. Wages are not addressed in the conditions of monopoly capitalism. A lot of time has passed since Marx.

What are wages? They are the living wage plus some savings. You need to show what the living wage is, the nominal and real wages. Show this decisively. We are in a struggle with capitalism right now on the basis of wages. Take real facts from contemporary life. In France, where the currency is falling, they receive millions, but it is impossible to buy anything. The English declare that they have the highest level of wages and cheap goods. But in doing this they hide that the wages may be nominally high, but all the same they don't even make for a living wage, not to mention savings. In England the prices for some produce, take bread and meat for instance, are low, but the workers receive this produce according to a quota and in restricted amounts. All other produce is bought at the market for high prices. There are multiple prices. Americans boast about their high standard of living, but according to their own statistics two out of three workers don't make a living wage. All of these

capitalist tricks need to be exposed. Using concrete facts we need to show these same English workers, who have long lived at the cost of superprofit in the colonies, that the fall in real wages under capitalism is axiomatic.

We can show them that during the Civil War in this country everyone was a millionaire. During the war we had the lowest prices; bread was sold for a ruble a kilogram, but produce was fixed.

We compute wages in a different way. We need to use concrete facts to show the situation with real wages here. This has large revolutionary and propagandistic significance.

It would be right to return to the question of wages in the section on monopoly capitalism and show how it really works.

In the textbook there is a big chapter on primitive accumulation. You can talk about this quickly, in two pages. Here it is told like some kind of duchess drove the peasants off the land. Who will you surprise with that? Things are more significant than an oversight. The epoch of imperialism provides more clear facts.

About the organization of the book. The section on capitalism should be divided into two sections: under the letter "A" address pre-monopoly capitalism and under the letter "B" address monopoly capitalism.

Now on the subject of political economy. In the textbook there is no definition of the subject of political economy. There is something more like an introduction. There is a difference between a definition of the subject of political economy and an introduction. In this sense the second version is closer to what is needed, although here we also get an introduction. That explains some of Marx's economic terms. It leads the readers to assimilate the economic work of Marx and Lenin.

They write that political economy examines production relations. But this is not clear to everyone. They say that political economy examines the relations between production and exchange. This is not true. Take exchange. In a primitive commune system there was no exchange. It was also undeveloped during the slave owning system. The tone is also not right. All of this is also not entirely appropriate for socialism. It needs to be said: political economy looks at production and the distribution of material wealth. This applies to all periods. Production is the relation of people to nature and distribution is about where the productive wealth goes. This is pure economics.

In the textbook there is no transition from the subject of political economy to the primitive commune system. Marx began *Capital* with goods. But you for some reason begin with the primitive commune system. You need to explain this.

There exist two methods of description: one method is abstract and analytical and begins with general abstract concepts and adds supporting historical material. This method of description (which Marx follows in *Capital*) is geared towards more educated people. The other method is historical. This describes the historical development of different economic systems and describes using historical material for a general understanding. If you want people to understand the theory of surplus value, lay out the question from the very birth of surplus value. The historical method is geared towards less educated people. It is more approachable, so that little by little the reader comes to understand the laws of economic development. (He reads definitions of the analytical and historical methods.)

Engels's scheme about savagery and barbarism is used in the textbook. This adds absolutely nothing. This is some kind of nonsense! Here, Engels did not want to split with Morgan¹ who at that point approached materialism. But this is Engels's issue. What are we involved for? Will they say that we are bad Marxists if we don't approach

the problem the way Engels does? Nothing of the kind! It reads like a pile of garbage: the stone age, the bronze age, the tribal system, matriarchy, patriarchy, then savagery and barbarism. This only confuses the readers. Savagery and barbarism--these are disdainful names when viewed from the side of "the civilized."

There are many babbling, empty and unnecessary words and many historical excursions. I read 100 pages and crossed out 10 and could have crossed out even more. There shouldn't be a single extra word in a textbook. The descriptions should be like a polished sculpture. Then at the end of a section there are some conclusions attacking imperialists: yes, you are imperialists--scoundrels, slave drivers, serfdom. This is all like Komsomol jokes, banners. This takes up time and clutters up people's heads. We should influence people's intelligence.

You write that Thomas More and Campanella² were individualists and did not interact with the masses. This is simply laughable. Is this what they are about? And if they had interacted with the masses, what would have resulted? That level of the development of productive forces required the existence of inequality. This inequality was impossible to destroy at that time. The utopianists did not know the laws of social development. They present an idealist interpretation.

Our cadres need to know Marxist economic theory well.

The first, older generation of Bolsheviks was well grounded. We memorized Capital, summarized, argued and tested one another. This was our strength. This helped us a lot. The second generation was less prepared. People were busy with practical work and construction. They studied Marxism through brochures.

The third generation has been raised on pamphlets and newspaper articles. They don't have a deep understanding of Marxism. They must be given food that is easily digestible. The majority of them were raised on quotations, not the study of Marx and Lenin. If things continue this way, people might degenerate. People may decide they don't need Capital when we are building socialism. This threatens degradation. This will mean death. In order to avoid this even in part, it is necessary to raise the level of economic understanding.

The current size of the textbook is not right. It swells to 766 pages. We need it to be no more than 500 pages, with around half about the presocialist formation and half about socialism.

The authors of the first version of the textbook are not concerned with describing the terms Marx uses in Capital. The terms which Marx and Lenin use often need to be brought up at the very beginning so that they may guide the reader towards an understanding of Capital and other works of Marx and Lenin.

It is bad that there are no disagreements in the committee and that there are no arguments over theoretical questions. I mean, you are involved in a historic undertaking. Everyone will read this textbook. Soviet power has been around for 33 years and we don't have a book on political economy. Everyone is waiting.

The literary side of the textbook is poorly developed, there is a lot of babbling, many excursions into civil [grazhdanskuyu] history and the history of culture. This is not a textbook on the history of culture. There should be fewer historical excursions. Turn to them only in those cases when it is necessary to illustrate a theoretical position. Take Marx's Capital and Lenin's the Development of Capitalism and have them guide you in your work.

When the textbook is finished it will be placed before the judgment of public opinion.

I have one more comment. The description of capitalism in the textbook only follows the line of industry. But you need to keep in mind the overall economy. In Capital Marx also concentrated on the question of industry. But we have a different task before us. He needed to expose capitalism and show the curse of capitalism. Marx understood the meaning of economics as a whole. This is clear from the meaning he gave to Quesnay's³ economic table. It is not right to describe agricultural issues only in the chapter on land leases.

We not only unmask capitalism, we overthrew it and stand in power. We know what kind of weight and meaning agriculture has in the economy.

As in Marx, our program of agriculture has not been given sufficient attention. This needs to be corrected.

We need to take the laws of economics in their entirety. Don't ignore agrarian relations during capitalism or during socialism.

1 Lewis Henry Morgan (1818-1881), American anthropologist who studied Native Americans.

2 Thomas More (1478-1535), an English politician and humanist scholar and Tommaso Campanella, an Italian utopianist of the seventeenth century.

3 Francois Quesnay (1694-1774), French physiocrat and political economist who emphasized the importance of agriculture.