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## Milovan Djilas' The New Class: An Analysis of the Communist System Study Guide

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Milovan Djilas, *THE NEW CLASS: An Analysis of the Communist System.*  
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Steve Samson

Thesis: Contemporary Communist revolutions differ fundamentally from earlier bourgeois revolutions in the West. 1) In those earlier revolutions, the object was "the destruction of the old political forms and an opening of the way for already mature social forces and relationships existing in the old society." (19) Force and violence appeared as a consequence of what resistance the old forms could still muster. Terror and despotism, when they resulted, were brief eruptions. Bourgeois revolutions, according to Djilas, inevitably led to political democracy. 2) Communist revolutions--in Russia, China, and Yugoslavia--did not occur because of the maturation of previously existing socialist relations, however, or even because capitalism was "overdeveloped." Rather, they occurred because capitalism was underdeveloped and incapable of carrying out the industrialization and economic transformation of the country. For example, three-quarters of the capital invested with the large banks in pre-revolutionary Russia was in the hands of foreign capitalists. Russia was in much the same situation of many Third World countries today, where a wealthy elite chooses to invest abroad and local capital is dominated by extraterritorial corporations. This power--called "imperialism" in its guise as a tool of national interests of foreign governments--was used to stunt economic growth and exploit these countries as sources of raw materials and cheap labor. Domestic capital was weak and largely an instrument of foreign capital. Industrialism, as the Bolsheviks recognized, held the key to ending this foreign domination and to ensuring the survival of those landless workers who were about to become a new proletarian class. Although Djilas does not state this fact baldly, Communism is portrayed primarily as a tool for realizing nationalist aspirations: that is, for freeing the country from imperialist domination and exploitation.

History: The new class is an artificial creation that emerges only after a Communist revolution has succeeded. It is born out of the revolutionary party's need to consolidate its gains and eliminate opposition. Its roots are in the original Bolshevik party but it is not identical with that party. The party itself was built up by professional revolutionaries, not bureaucrats. The new class originated in the party (not the other way around, as orthodox class theory would maintain) and it grows in political power even as the party itself wanes (or is purged). An oligarchy results. Its purpose is to establish an administrative monopoly throughout the land. In return, this oligarchy is encouraged to remain loyal through the granting of special privileges and economic preference. Djilas emphasizes the carrot and seems to ignore the stick.

A key to the understanding of the new class is the vital need for industrialization. Industry is its power base. Without industry the new class cannot consolidate its position or authority. Echoing Max Weber, Djilas notes that modern industrial society requires a complex bureaucratic apparatus. The industrial societies of both East and West have their corps of white-collar functionaries. The difference between this special bureaucratic stratum in the West and the new class in the

East hinges on the question of authority. Bureaucrats in the East are not simply state officials as they are in the West. They represent-- in Marx's sense of the term--a new ownership class. (44)

Djilas compares this new class with earlier, historical classes of officials. What distinguishes the new class from its predecessors is its totalitarian nature. Not only does it exclude rival centers of control but it also seeks to extend its control over all relationships within the society. Even so, Djilas wants to see it as a temporary phenomenon (elsewhere he suggests otherwise) which characterizes a particular stage of development in the social revolution. (69)

The new class is a class in the true sense of the word because it disposes of property: in this case, nationalized property. Private property is regarded as unfavorable to establishing the new class' political authority since it represents a rival set of property relationships which could threaten the position of the new class. In place of private property, "the new class obtains its power, privileges, ideology, and customs ...from collective ownership...which the class administers and distributes in the name of the nation and society." (45) These ownership rights are the key to its power. Its social status is reflected in discrepancies in pay, special quarters, country homes, and other perks. Party membership no longer means sacrifice.

Communism (Bolshevik variety) has gone through three successive stages of development: 1) Lenin's revolutionary Communism: after the revolutionary victory, however, Lenin transformed the party into the builder of a new society, which begat 2) Stalin's dogmatic Communism: under Stalin's iron-fisted leadership, collectivization was imposed in order to transform the social relationships into a well-oiled industrial machine, which begat 3) the non-dogmatic Communism of the collective leadership which succeeded Stalin: however, this "non-dogmatism" is applied by the new class only within its own circles. As the age of heroes passes, it is succeeded by a period of ideological stagnation.

The dogged stubbornness by which industrialization was pursued reveals a strength and consistency of purpose that is beyond the capacity of any mere bureaucracy. Such initiative and foresight can be accounted for only by realizing that the purposes--even the very survival--of an ownership class were at stake. The new class is more highly organized and more class-conscious than any class in recorded history. It is also the most self-deluded of classes, as it does not recognize that it is a new ownership class. It is subject to many of the same ills of similar classes: "unscrupulous ambition, duplicity, toadyism, jealousy," careerism, and ever-expanding bureaucracy. The bureaucracy offers the usual "job" ladders to encourage the upwardly mobile managerial types. The hierarchy is pyramidal and requires a degree of social mobility. The whole structure, in fact, is based on new forms of exploitation. "Through the kolkhozes and the use of the compulsory crop-purchase system, the new class has succeeded in making vassals of the peasants and grabbing a lion's share of the peasants' income...." (63) The liberalization trends of recent years, which has been decentralizing the economy, does not mean a change in ownership. It only means that greater rights are being extended to the lower strata of the new class (or bureaucracy). A monopoly of ownership, however, is inconsistent with freedom in society as a whole. Token reforms, such as "workers' management," do not bring about a sharing in the profits by those who produce them.

As the new class grows in power, it becomes rigid, sterile, and isolated. Its industrial aims will be accomplished but at the price of a lingering shame at the means it used, embittering the memory even after the new class has passed from the scene.

Problems: If a tree is known by its fruits, the new class will be known for problems associated with its 1) legalistic formalism, and 2) its militarism and cult of force. Foremost is the problem of the State. The continued existence of a State is an obvious contradiction inside Communist theory and practice. "Communist regimes are a form of latent civil war between the government and the people." (87) The State, in fact, is subordinated to the organs of oppression. An independent judiciary and rule of law would make it possible for an opposition to appear. The main function of, or rationale for preserving, the State is "education." The system requires a tyranny over the mind and is strengthened by making one ideology, one class, even one man, sovereign. Djilas discusses some of the psychological manifestations of this tyranny: such as the hysterical confessions that marked the Moscow Trials during the purges. Partly because of such extraordinary outbursts of frenzied devotion, many observers conclude that the essence of Communism is its religious nature. Others, however, claim that it is true, revolutionary socialism. Still others maintain that it is merely a contemporary variety of ancient despotism. Djilas acknowledges a degree of truth in each of these paradigms, and offers his model only as a partial explanation. Accordingly, he maintains that Communism is essentially a type of modern totalitarianism, based on three vehicles for controlling the people: power, ownership, and ideology. Although a form of state capitalism in appearance, this system is a unique alloy. "Communism, while absorbing into itself all kinds of other elements --feudal, capitalist, and even slave-owning--remains individual and independent at the same time." (172)

National aspirations continue to influence the course of Communism's development. In the third stage, nationalism is becoming more important to national Communist parties than obeisance to Moscow. These parties are simply continuing a tradition set by Lenin himself. The imperialistic control the Soviets wish to extend has been most successfully resisted by Communists who have made independent revolutions. Djilas discusses the significance of what has since come to be called Eurocommunism. Many of his arguments about nationalism anticipate those of Andrei Amalrik. Djilas concludes that the historical tendency towards world unification is proceeding dialectically as the world-systems of East and West engage in conflict. Socialism itself is divided: a fact of the greatest significance. Djilas believes the reformist spirit of Social Democracy is most appropriate for transforming Western nations. He does not envision the emergence of a single world system at the end of the historical dialectic. The tendency toward unity of world production, in fact, cannot lead everywhere to the same type of production, or the same forms of ownership and government. Djilas seeks greater diversification or individuation within this larger unity.

Retrospect: Milovan Djilas, the hero of the partisans who battled the Nazis and then made a revolution--Djilas, the former Vice President of Communist Yugoslavia, later ousted by Tito--still retains his faith in the revolution and Marxian socialism. This is reflected in the historicism of his perspective and his personal ambivalence towards his subject. The book is not systematically organized, but is remarkably thorough.