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# JOŽE SREBRNIČ: On the Agrarian Theses

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## About the author

**Jože Srebrnič** (1884, Solkan near Gorizia–the Soča river near Anhovo, 1944) was a Slovenian revolutionary, participant in the Russian Revolution, member of parliament for the Communist Party of Italy, and Yugoslav partisan during the Second World War. Coming from rural Gorizia within the Habsburg Empire, his career as an engaged intellectual was dedicated primarily to developing Marxist solutions to the agrarian question on the European semi-periphery.[1]

1 The biography is based on the following sources: Branko Marušič, "Srebrnič, Jože (1884–1944)," in *Slovenska biografija* (Ljubljana: ZRC SAZU, 2013), http://www.slovenska-biografija.si/oseba/sbi599084/#primorski-slovenski-biografski-leksikon, last accessed April 24, 2024, originally published in *Primorski slovenski biografski leksikon*, vol. 3/14, *Sedej–Suhadolc*, ed. Martin Jevnikar (Gorica: Goriška Mohorjeva družba, 1988). Branko Marušič and Milko Rener, eds., *Jože Srebrnič (1884–1944): narodni heroj* (Ljubljana: Jože Moškrič, 1986).

Srebrnič was born in the family of a carpenter and became a socialist already in his high school days in Gorizia. After regular military service, he attended an officers' school, but was denied a military rank for political reasons. In 1907, he joined the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party (*Jugoslovanska socialdemokratska stranka*, JSDS) and the Workers' Educational Society in his native Solkan. A year later, he moved to Graz to study law, but was soon forced to give up his studies due to poverty and returned to Solkan. He joined his father in working as a carpenter, but soon became a farmer instead, working in his own orchard. This started his interest, rare at the time, in the link between socialism, with its focus on the industrial proletariat, and the agrarian question. He was among the few Slovenian Marxists who had dealt with the peasantry before 1914 and made practical efforts at organizing them politically.[2] In February 1912, he was the delegate of Solkan for the Fourth Conference of the Yugoslav Social Democratic Party. At the Fifth Conference in May 1913, he explicitly proposed socialist political agitation in the countryside, saying that Marxists should organize the peasantry. His proposals included the establishment of peasant economic organizations, as well as laying the ground for their political and trade union education, preparing them for more extensive activities; he also proposed a special socialist newspaper to deal only with agrarian issues.

In 1914, Srebrnič was mobilized into the Austro-Hungarian Army. As an opponent of the war, he voluntarily surrendered himself to the Imperial Russian Army already at the end of August that year. He spent the next several years in captivity before being liberated by the February Revolution in 1917. He became a Bolshevik and was one of the founders of the Yugoslav Communist Group in Russia, gathering communists from both the former Austro-Hungarian Empire as well as Serbia and Bulgaria. He regularly wrote for the Yugoslav Bolsheviks' newspaper *Svetska Revolucija* (The World Revolution, 1918–1919), calling for the establishment of a Balkan Soviet Federative Socialist Republic as an alternative to the Yugoslav project. This was the result of his belief that Yugoslav unification would be subverted by the Karađorđević dynasty and the nationalist tendencies of the majority-Serb Radical Party led by Nikola Pašić (1845–1926). In March 1919, Srebrnič returned from Russia and settled in Solkan, which was by then occupied by Italian troops. He continued working as an agricultural smallholder and became an active communist. He joined the Socialist Party of Italy (PSI) and led agitation as part of its communist current. He was the head of the informal communist organization for the Gorizia region acting within the PSI, and led it into the new Italian Communist Party (PCI), established in January 1921 in

2 See the entry on Albin Prepeluh in this volume.

Livorno. He soon became a member of its Provincial Committee for the Julian March, headquartered in Trieste.

Starting from February 1920, Srebrnič was a regular contributor in the Trieste-based Slovenian-language communist newspaper *Delo* (Labor, 1920–1934). As a communist organizer, he established peasant cooperatives and developed cultural activities in the countryside. He supported the majority policy of "abstentionism" pushed by Amadeo Bordiga (1889–1970) within the newly established Communist Party, which opposed electoral participation. However, both Srebrnič and the party would soon reach a decision to take part in elections, a position endorsed by the Communist International. Thus, in January 1922, Srebrnič was elected deputy mayor of Solkan on a communist ticket. A month later he participated in the Second Congress of the PCI in Rome, where he opposed the party line on land redistribution and called for the collectivization of agriculture. In 1923, the local councils were dissolved by decree, to be appointed directly by the Prime Minister, and he thus lost the post of deputy mayor. In April 1924, he was elected to the Italian Parliament as the first Slovenian member from the ranks of the communists. He participated in anti-fascist actions and was under constant police surveillance. That same year, he was a PCI delegate at the Fifth Comintern Congress in Moscow and was deputy head of the party's peasant committee under Ruggero Grieco (1893–1955).

In November 1926, the fascist government revoked the immunity of MPs and outlawed all other political parties. Srebrnič was arrested and confined alongside his party comrades and other opposition politicians. He was sentenced to five years' confinement, which he spent, successively, on the islands of Lampedusa, Ustica, Ponza, and Ventotene. From December 1930 until March 1931, he was imprisoned in the Neapolitan jail of Poggioreale. He was released in February 1932 and allowed to return to Solkan, but only seven months later he was sentenced again and first sent to prison in Naples, then confined on the island of Ponza. In April 1939, Srebrnič was again released and almost immediately tried to emigrate to Yugoslavia. The Yugoslav police arrested him and extradited him back to Italy, resulting in another bout of imprisonment until the fall of Italy in September 1943.

After Italy capitulated, Srebrnič was released from the Renicci concentration camp. He immediately went to Slovenia and established ties with the partisan movement. By November 1943, he was already among the guerillas. He began writing propaganda for the partisan newspaper *Primorski poročevalec* (The Littoral Herald, 1943–1944). At the same time, he became a member of the Peoples' Liberation Council for the Slovenian Littoral, tasked specifically with the agrarian question. In February 1944, Srebrnič was the delegate of the Gorizia

region for the founding session of the Slovenian Peoples' Liberation Council, the representative body of the Liberation Front, which met in Črnomelj. He wrote articles on the peasantry and their role in the coming revolution. He participated in the electoral campaign for the parliamentary election on the liberated territory as the communist candidate. On July 11, 1944, on his way to the Third Party Conference for the Slovenian Littoral, he drowned while attempting to cross the river Soča.

As a veteran of the communist movement who died during the war, despite not having died in battle, he was posthumously awarded the Order of the People's Hero. He received a place in the memory politics of the People's (from 1963, Socialist) Republic of Slovenia, with schools and streets named after him, but was markedly less prominent at the federal level, as he was never particularly involved in Yugoslav affairs. Soon after his passing, his comrade Ivan Regent (1884–1967) wrote a brief biography and obituary of Srebrnič in the form of a pamphlet.[3] In 1946, his remains were transferred to Solkan, and a memorial plaque was erected in his honor.

Srebrnič considered his work on the history of the Ancient Slavs, written on Ponza in the 1930s, to be his magnum opus. Unfortunately, the manuscript was confiscated by the Yugoslav police in 1940 and is believed to have been lost forever. Most of his other theoretical works have been published on the pages of the Triestine *Delo* and various newspapers of the partisan movement in the Slovenian Littoral.

MOST IMPORTANT WORKS: "Referat na V. goriški deželni konferenci JSDS" (1913), published in *Zgodovinski arhiv KPJ*, vol. 5 (Belgrade, 1951); "Sovjeti," *Delo*, no. 4 (Trieste, 1920); "Kmečke zadruge ali kmečke komune," *Delo*, no. 9, 10, 12, and 13 (Trieste, 1920); "Od bivšega vojnega ujetnika v Rusiji," *Delo*, no. 114 (Trieste, 1921); "O agrarnih tezah," *Delo*, no. 122 (Trieste, 1922); "O odpovedi kolonskih pogodb," *Delo*, no. 141 (Trieste, 1922); "Marksizem in vera," *Delo*, nos. 183–184 (Trieste, 1923); "Individualno in socijalno delo," *Delo*, no. 220 (Trieste, 1924); "Socijalizacija žena," *Delo*, nos. 273–275 (Trieste, 1925); "Kako mi kmetje podpremo osvobodilno fronto," *Primorski kmečki glas*, no. 1 (1944); "Kaj nam je dala nova narodna oblast," *Primorski kmečki glas*, no. 2 (1944); "Primorski poslanci na zasedanju prvega slov. parlamenta," *Primorski kmečki glas*, no. 3 (1944); "Naše nove občine," *Primorski kmečki glas*, no. 4 (1944); "Kako bomo volili?" *Primorski kmečki glas*, no. 5 (1944).

3 Ivan Regent, *Jože Srebrnič: junaški bojevnik za bratstvo med narodi in za pravice delovnega ljudstva* (Gorica: Primorski dnevnik, 1946).

## Context

Despite being primarily an ideology centered around the industrial working class, Marxism in the twentieth century had to contend with the overwhelming numerical dominance of the peasantry. Although in most European countries at the time of the October Revolution the capitalist mode of production was already dominant, the majority of the population still lived in the countryside, making their plight particularly pertinent. The Second International rarely focused on this issue, however, a fact which Srebrnič criticized at the beginning of his 1922 article, translated below.

The standard view of the turn-of-the-century Social Democratic Party of Germany, developed by its leading theoretician Karl Kautsky (1854–1938), taken as the model for many organizations within the International, was that the only feasible socialist answer to the agrarian issue was the collectivization of land.[4] The Bolsheviks turned this proposition on its head, suggesting instead that, in underdeveloped countries, the peasants' request for individual land ownership should be heeded first. Contrary to stereotypes of Bolshevik dogmatism juxtaposed to social-democratic flexibility, it was the post-First World War social democrats who held onto the dogma from the previous period. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks' support for a peasant revolution in the countryside, based on land redistribution, made the difference needed to win the civil war. In countries like Hungary, the revolution was defeated precisely because the agrarian question proved to be a stumbling block: in the eyes of the peasants, collectivization did not lead to any significant change of their situation on the ground.

By 1922, Srebrnič was ideologically and politically aligned to various communist "ultra-left" currents. The ultra-left was distinguished from the Bolsheviks by their consistent anti-parliamentarianism and disregard for communist tactical concessions on matters such as the national and peasant questions—a matter that the Russian communists considered indispensable to the success of the revolution in the periphery. In accordance with such views, Srebrnič believed in the immediate collectivization of agriculture as opposed to land redistribution. The Bolsheviks, too, believed that collectivization was the ultimate and optimal solution for agriculture, as individual land ownership effectively amounted to the development of capitalism in the countryside. However, their plan at the time was the gradual construction of collective agriculture upon the success of revolutions in more developed European states, with long-term incentives for joining collective farms and cooperatives. Around 1922, as the prospect of a European revolution seemed more and more dire, the Communist International introduced the

4 See Karl Kautsky, *The Agrarian Question* (London & Winchester, MA: Zwan Publications, 1988), 311–44.

United Front policy, based on communist cooperation with reformist socialist and agrarian parties. In the Soviet Union, the New Economic Policy (NEP, introduced in 1921) also favored the development of capitalist relations in the countryside. However, the left in the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) was skeptical of both internal and external developments coming from Soviet Russia.

As part of the ultra-left of the PCI, Srebrnič argued for the "traditional" socialist view of land collectivization as the appropriate policy for the Italian party, a view that was not shared by the party center around Amadeo Bordiga at the time (although considered one of the quintessential "ultra-leftists," Bordiga by and large shared Lenin's (1870–1924) views on tactical concessions on the national and peasant question). Considering that land collectivization was both a policy of the Second International, harshly criticized by the communists, and of the revolutionaries who surpassed the Bolsheviks in their radicalism, the policy could conceivably be accused of being a deviation on both the "left" and the "right." Italian socialists, however, could have argued that—given the relative economic development (at least) in the country's north—collectivization could make more sense as a policy than the creation of fully capitalist agriculture.

Given all these circumstances, the agrarian question was an ever-present stumbling block in the matter of the transition from capitalism to socialism. The ultra-left merely expressed the general anxiety of Marxists towards the peasantry. If the peasantry retained individual landholdings, this would be both an obstacle and a failure of constructing a socialist system. Srebrnič's article, therefore, is significant because he makes an explicit effort to define the future communist society, a rare occurrence among South Slavic communists of the day. The translation of pamphlets from German or Russian communists was quite common, but the articulation of one's own definitions markedly less so.

In this text, Srebrnič defines communism as a moneyless society without commodity production, based on a centrally planned industrial economy and collective agriculture. Explicitly following Marx's *Capital*, he prioritizes the transformation of "individual labor" into "social labor." Even more significantly, Srebrnič explicitly states that communism cannot be constructed "on the basis of commodity production." In other words, even a socialist society, prior to communism, cannot be constructed if commodity production and money still exist. The only major difference between socialism and communism is that the latter presumes the absence of the state. This is in contrast to a subsequent Soviet redefinition, according to which the existence of money as means of exchange was in fact a feature of socialism as much as of capitalism, and the abolition of money would have to wait the transition from socialism to communism, to take place at an undisclosed point in the future.

Srebrnič's definition of socialism as a moneyless society is not particularly original. In this, he merely followed Marxist orthodoxy, which can be found in the works of Kautsky, Lenin, Leon Trotsky (1879–1940), Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), and even the early writings of Joseph Stalin (1878–1953).[5] However, by the early 1930s, Stalin would backtrack on this and proclaim the "construction of socialism" based on commodity production, now merely renamed "socialist commodity production." Srebrnič's work is thus also significant for explicitly outlining a pre-Stalinist definition of socialism which had been a matter of consensus before the First Five-Year Plan, but was virtually forgotten in subsequent definitions and practices of socialism.[6]

Srebrnič's 1922 treatise begins with a footnote stating, "I would like to point out that the report is intended for the Party's supporters in general." In other words, it was part of the internal debate preceding the Second Congress of the PCI. There is a major feature of such argumentation, which Srebrnič frequently employs, which is important for a meta-analysis of communist theoretical debates in general. This feature should be kept in mind when reading Marxist intellectual works, as it was common in both the Second and Third Internationals, and has implications for subsequent development of "personality cults" in socialist regimes. The feature in question is the usage of Marx and Engels as a form of appeal to authority, a logical fallacy presented as an objective argument. In other words, a preposition is proven right or wrong not through empirical verification, but through reference to the works of the "founding fathers."

"On the Agrarian Theses" is a document significant for illustrating the maximalist political proposals of communists at the very beginnings of their movement. Considering Srebrnič's position between the Italian and Yugoslav contexts, his work not only represents a link connecting the two state contexts, but also serves as a paradigm of the aforementioned maximalism in a broader region encompassing both the Apennine and the Balkan Peninsulas. His theses offer a vision of socialism based on the expectation of a moneyless society, and also one assuming the possibility of immediate land collectivization. The opinion that peasants in the periphery should be turned into smallholders would become the dominant communist view over the 1920s, and Srebrnič's opinion would become anathema, one that he too would abandon by the 1940s. Nevertheless, this text

5 See in particular the unambiguous definition of socialism in Joseph Stalin, "The Agrarian Question," in *Works*, vol. 1, *1901–1907* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 216–32. For the Stalin of 1905, socialism entails "abolishing commodity production, abolishing the money system, razing capitalism to its foundations and socialising all the means of production." (ibid., 221.)

6 One major exception was Boris Kidrič, who was profoundly concerned with the problem of "socialist" commodity production and wanted to resolve it. See Darko Suvin on Kidrič and problems of "socialist commodity production": Darko Suvin, *Splendour, Misery, and Possibilities. An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 86–95.

remains as an expression of the optimistic belief, still harbored by many Marxists in the 1920s, which presumed that the peasant masses who had just come out of feudalism were ready to become immediately part of the socialist mode of production.

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The question of agricultural labor is of such paramount importance for the proletariat striving to transform the present economic order that it cannot address the issue of the socialist revolution unless it is first confident about the position it should take on the agrarian question. All of the propaganda and organizational work of the Second International has revolved mainly around industrial workers. This is actually not a mistake because capitalism has, in fact, mostly developed in the field of so-called industrial production, creating the industrial proletariat as its opponent, which, due to its accumulation in the factories, has had much more favorable conditions to get itself organized than the proletariat employed in agricultural labor. However, many errors have indeed been committed by conducting this propaganda and organization from an industrial point of view, in the sense that two proletariats exist that are not only superficially different but also have fundamentally opposed interests.

…

Let us focus on the purely economic aspect of the issue: in the Second International, there has been and still is considerable confusion as to the extent to which social production encompasses various economic sectors; in the Communist International, there has also been some uncertainty in this respect. It is not at all unreasonable to first ask whether it is possible for the proletarian revolution to immediately introduce at least the minimum of the communist economic order and whether future development will allow for any other economic system besides the communist one. The rejection of the

second part of the question is justified in *Capital* with irrefutable clarity: social labor and the social production framework cannot tolerate the economic peddling of small producers, whose final fate has been sealed without exception. This fact has already been confirmed by all the technological means of modern capitalist production: machines, railways, steamboats, the telegraph, and the telephone do not tolerate harmful profiteering by small producers. All the objective capitalist production data speak in favor of the immediate introduction of this minimum. Capitalism itself exists alongside other older economic remnants. As it meets its sad destiny, the open battlefield of its small-economy adherents will not be the first to succumb. Its entrenched positions in heavy industry and large estates will fail first, and from there, the proletariat will take over all the small producers' outposts.

What, then, are the elements of a communist economy? Individual labor must be replaced by social labor, while social labor must also be given a social material framework (factories, buildings, machinery, the power of water, electricity, warehouses, etc., collective land, cattle, machines, warehouses, means of communication: railways, steamboats, the telegraph, the telephone, automobiles, etc.). Furthermore, the social organization of labor will abolish the production of commodities and replace it with the production of necessities. With the elimination of commodity production, its corollary—money—will also be abolished in all its forms. "Any economy which produces commodities is also an economy that exploits labor, but only capitalist commodity production has developed exploitation on a gigantic scale." A communist who intends to introduce communism based on commodity production is doing the work of Sisyphus. Capitalist labor energy, which stems from the desire for profit, must be replaced with the awareness of work commitment.

Associated workers' relations are regulated by standard working hours, which is the simplest and most accurate measure of *social* labor, whether in factories or agriculture. Piecework should be discarded as a matter of principle and used only as a potential disciplinary means against sabotage, to maintain a normal work intensity (enthusiasm). Remuneration must be based on the workers' physical needs in the given situation (without monetary depreciation, of course). Obviously, communist production will be mass production because of its productive organisms (factories, collective land). Due to the communication organisms (railways, steamships, automobiles), this will be matched by the direct mass provision of supplies. Therefore, any small-scale production will represent mere economic peddling and small-scale distribution of meaningless contraband.

Social labor, the social awareness of work commitment, standard working

hours, the production of necessities (without depreciation), technology, mass production and direct distribution, and social hygiene through genuine exchange between industrial and agricultural labor—these are the main outlines of the communist economy, which represents the foundation for all social relations in communism.

…

The union of factories and land is a necessary precondition for a successful revolutionary struggle because it is through this union that the economic circle is completed. It is impossible to socialize a factory if we do not simultaneously socialize enough of the land. The endless Russian fields could not guarantee the supply of either food or raw materials for the few existing factories, and land fragmentation contributed significantly to this. It is true that in capitalism—which relies, above all, on modern technology—the industries dominated by constant capital (machines) have developed far more than agriculture dominated by variable capital (workers). However, it is by no means true that the division of even the most primitive estates represents technological progress. This claim is caused by an optical illusion; it is this statement that has won David his infamous laurels against Marxism. "By its very nature, a subdivided estate excludes the development of the social productive force of labor, the social framework of labor, the social pooling of capital (technological means), large-scale animal husbandry, or the progressive application of science. It implies an 'infinite fragmentation of the means of production', isolation of the producers themselves, and an immense waste of labor power." "Small estates create a class of farmers living half outside human society, combining all the brutality of a primitive social form with the torments and sufferings of civilized lands." "Ultimately, all the criticism of small estates is nothing but criticism of private property, which stifles and hinders the development of agriculture." These are Marx's eternally true theses on small estates.

…

Capitalist production also reveals that advanced capitalism organizes production in a new field, in the middle of a backward economy, directly based on the latest technological means, without first going through any craft production stages. Why should it be impossible for the proletariat to organize land in such a direct manner? Indeed, this could be rather questionable because a revolutionary movement inevitably leads to the stagnation of economic life due to sabotage by the capitalist-minded classes. The proletariat loses nothing because of this. Communism will indeed be based

on the existing technological achievements, but it will, first of all, solve its essential task by "establishing clear mutual relations between the people as workers (social laborers)". It will be able to achieve this in sabotaged factories as well as on collective land, despite people like Otto Bauer, who claim that this would be "more according to the rules of the order rather than the economic principles." If the anarchist Enrico Malatesta, when asked what will happen if cereals run out, answers that it will be necessary to pick up a shovel and sow it, then this is a very proletarian revolutionary method, and the proletariat, especially the communists, should only resort to it to defend the revolutionary gains against the sabotaging bourgeoisie. This is a simple, commonly understood move: communism knows no eminence. If we speak of "eminence" (the bourgeoisie likes to emphasize this and would like to create "eminence" everywhere, not realizing that, in this way, "eminences" level themselves out), Marx's eminence would stem precisely from his ability to analyze, with unprecedented perceptiveness, the complex capitalist mechanisms from a straightforward proletarian point of view by demonstrating clearly that all the glory and power of the capitalist potentates rests solely on the labor for which they have not paid the workers. Meanwhile, Lenin's "eminence" is based on how boldly he steers the Soviet Republic through the tides of global capitalism, and yet he also attends Communist Saturdays as a worker-proletarian. The bourgeoisie has transformed thought into handicraft; the proletariat must unite thought with labor, personify labor, and, as a truly revolutionary class, raise the hammer and sickle as the fundamental duty and right of free citizens.