

Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation



**Pamphlet of the
Communist Workers' Organisation**

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Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation
Pamphlet of the Communist Workers' Organisation
Affiliate of the Internationalist Communist Tendency in Britain

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Introduction

The issue of class consciousness is one of the most important for the working class, and for its revolutionary minorities. Behind it lies the really big questions, such as "How can capitalism be destroyed?", and "Is the working class capable of creating a new society?". Some, impatient to bring about the end of a system which has plainly outlived its usefulness for the vast majority of humanity, have even despaired of the fight because they say "the working class has been bought off" or because "capital's control of the media is so complete that workers can easily be fooled into accepting capitalist ideas". Others, like the various Bordigist "parties", argue that the only sense in which the proletariat actually exists as a class is if it forms a political party which is the sole expression of its revolutionary consciousness. Still others (and these seem to be a growing band today), believe the whole question of revolution will be posed without worrying about revolutionary consciousness at all. For them revolution is basically a spontaneous issue which will arise directly from the daily economic struggle of the working class.

It is our aim to address these, and other questions here, but not as abstract philosophy. Our approach will be unashamedly historical and attempt to draw out the real experience of the working class in its struggles of the last two centuries. Communism is not just a theory or ideology but the expression of the real movement of the working class in its fight against exploitation. This struggle is not a linear one, progressively homing in on an inevitable victory but now advances, then retreats, as we have seen in the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917. One thing though, it never completely vanishes, for capitalism's contradictions constantly recreate the material conditions for the existence of a separate working class consciousness. In this historical approach we are in conformity with Marx who rejected speculation for a study of real life. When,

Empty talk about consciousness ceases and real knowledge has to take its place. When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence.

(The German Ideology)

Or to borrow from his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach our aim here is not merely to interpret the world but to contribute to the revolutionary practice required to change it.

In this sense our short pamphlet is only part of a work in progress, a contribution to debate and to the future struggle of our class. The pamphlet has its origins in a series of articles which appeared in Revolutionary Perspectives. For this reason some arguments tend to be repeated but we hope that this adds rather than detracts from its overall message. We would like to thank all the comrades who have sent in corrections for this reprint but we know that it is not by any means exhaustive and does not deal with questions like, for example, how a party comes to be organised inside the working class under present conditions (this is dealt with in our other publications) but it is a statement about where we think the class struggle has so far brought us on this long road to the freedom for not only the world working class but, through it, for the whole of humanity itself.

But before we can fully embark on that task, we need to first remind ourselves how the whole issue of consciousness arose...

CWO
May 2018



1

Idealism and Bourgeois Materialism

Consciousness in General

Ideas do not spring from thin air. The source of ideas, or consciousness, has occupied the ideologists of class society for thousands of years. For them the great problem was the distinction between mind and matter, between the animal bodies of human beings and their capacity for abstract thought. In ancient society, particularly in Ancient Athens, philosophers like Plato saw ideas as being "innate", only being brought into the light of day by the articulation of thought. For him the real world was the world of ideas and the material world contained only shadows or partial reflections of these ideas. The material world was thus a secondary world dependent on the world of ideas, and without the world of ideas the material world would not exist at all. By studying the shadows and reflections in the secondary material world the wise man can come to know the world of ideas or the real world. Consciousness of the real world is attainable only to the philosophers who can undertake this study. The rest of humanity is deceived by the world of shadows, and consequently have "false consciousness". It was no accident that such an idea was developed within a leisured class in a society where slaves did all the work, and where labour was seen as something close to animal activity.

These Greek aristocrats are the earliest of what we would call the "idealists". For them, ideas have an existence independent of human activity and are the prime motive of all historical change. In some ways, this idealism was an advance on the later Christian philosophers of the feudal period such as Thomas Aquinas. He re-interpreted Aristotle's world-view for the expanding Christian Church. He placed the Judaeo-Christian God (rather than "The One" in Greek philosophy) as the fount of human consciousness. For the Christians our thoughts belonged to the soul which departed the animal body after death. Long before the advent of Christianity, humanity as a species that is aware, came to explain that awareness by discovering something outside itself in religion. Religion, throughout most of human history, was a substitute for science. Or as Marx put it in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

The gods in the beginning are not the cause but the effect of man's intellectual confusion.

op.cit. [Lawrence and Wishart, 1959, p82]

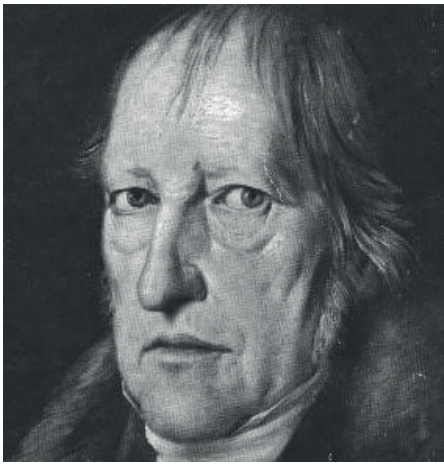
Throughout the Middle Ages, authority rather than reason became the doctrine of the Christian Church. Nature was external

to human beings (alienated from them in philosophical terms) and this could not be fully understood by them as it was God-given. It was only under the impetus of the scientific revolution, which was predicated on the early development of capitalism, that this approach began to break down. The Copernican revolution overturned the Biblical and Ptolemaic understanding of the cosmos. This in turn opened up the way for crude materialist philosophy.

This took several forms from the rationalism of Descartes (who came up with ideas only using reason - he boasted he made his best leaps in knowledge in bed!) to the empiricism of Bacon who had the merit of understanding that the world was a product of humanity's material existence. Bacon was the father of modern English empiricism in that he argued that what could not be proved by immediate experiment was unscientific.

The same type of vulgar materialism can be found in the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Locke, both in science and politics, upheld the rule of law. For him scientists like Newton, who systematised whole branches of knowledge (like physics and mechanics), gave new laws to explain the order of the universe. For Locke, the English "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-9 brought the same spirit of law and order to British society after the turbulence of the Civil War and Commonwealth. There was little room for the supernatural in either Newton's or Locke's view of the world, a fact which brought them both criticism from the established Church. Not surprisingly this initial bourgeois materialism developed strongest in Britain, a country where capitalism and industrialism was already advancing rapidly. It was to remain so for a further century. Thus, 'The summit of eighteenth century science was materialism' (Engels, *The Position of England in the Eighteenth Century*). This was certainly an advance since it established the fundamental basis of the materialist world outlook that: All consciousness is derived from the material world and experience of this world.

But, whilst this materialism was opposed to the spiritual subjectivism of religion, it could not seriously challenge it. This was due to several reasons which can only be dealt with schematically here. In the first place, the rising bourgeoisie tended to see human nature as a constant that had not changed throughout history. They equated the rise in science and reason to something that was inevitable since they could not fully understand that it was the rise of a new mode of production dominated by themselves



G.W. F. Hegel
1770-1831

which had helped to precipitate it.

Similarly, they viewed human beings simply as disconnected atoms. Thus they saw consciousness as being just about the individual as such and not about the role of the individual in society. This was why they were fascinated by the story of Alexander Selkirk, who lived for years on a desert island, and which was immortalised in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. All their works on economic behaviour started from this very bourgeois figure (who even has a manservant miraculously provided to do the labour!), as if it was an accurate explanation of how humanity had arrived at capitalism. Marx dismissed these fantasies as "Robinsonades" in his later writings.

As to religion, the British could only throw up a sceptic like David Hume who argued that modern science had shown that we could not be sure about anything. The conclusion was that there probably was a God but as we could not communicate with him then we should live life as though he did not exist! A major problem for the bourgeoisie was that religion had a social function. As Napoleon brutally put it in 1802 "Simple people need religion". How would the masses respect morality if it was not for the restraints of religion?

The French Revolution, when "the people" turned into the "mob", drove the British bourgeoisie back to support for Church and King against the "god-less French". The demands of social order decreed that science line up with the ruling class as expressed in Humphrey Davy's introductory discourse at the Royal Institution in 1802:

The unequal division of property and of labour, the difference of rank and conditions amongst mankind, are the sources of power in civilised life, its moving causes and its very soul.

Quoted in J.D. Bernal, *Science in History*, Vol. 2 (Pelican, 1969), p540

A perfect illustration that there is no separating science from society. No wonder they bricked up the door to the public gallery so that "rude mechanics" could not get in to hear this clear endorsement of class society!

But the same French Revolution which led to the victory of Tory reaction in Britain had the opposite effect in the German-speaking world.

The Defeat of Idealism

In Germany, a series of over 360 separate feudal and semi-feudal states until Napoleon defeated the Prussians at Jena in 1806, idealist philosophy remained the dominant force in ruling class thinking. As Marx dubbed it, it was "the German ideology". And the dominant figure in this idealist world was G.W.F. Hegel. Hegel was in many ways a contradictory thinker. Influenced by the drama of the French Revolution, and even more directly by the Napoleonic conquests of Europe (Hegel himself witnessed the arrival of this "world historic spirit" in Jena), Hegel recognised that human history was not unchanging and that it had to be based on reality.

What is actual is necessary in itself. Necessity consists in this, that the whole is sundered into the different concepts and that this divided whole yields a fixed and permanent determinacy. However this is not fossilised determinacy but one which permanently recreates itself in its dissolution.

G. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (Oxford 1942 p.283)

What Hegel gives us is a mechanism to understand change (the dialectic)¹ and even a recognition that this must be rooted in reality. For Hegel though, reality only became real when philosophers recognise it in what he called "absolute spirit". This was a actually a cover for God. Hegel's argument was that as man pursued his quest for understanding he would logically arrive at the Absolute or union with God. For Hegel the purpose of reason was to understand the mind of God. It had no concrete results.

Die Philosophie ist in der tat Gottesdienst. [Philosophy is, in fact, in the service of God]

or, as he put it in another famous passage

Philosophy comes too late to teach the world what it should be . . . The owl of

Minerva only flies when dusk has fallen.
"Preface to *Rechtsphilosophie*"

But despite Hegel, ideas do have practical consequences. To argue that the purpose of thinking is merely to articulate what actually exists is to rationalise the status quo. Thus he ended by arguing (in post-Napoleonic Germany), that the Absolute ideal was the already existing Prussian State and Church. In doing this, he not only did violence to his own ideas on historical change, but also split his followers. It was the debate on the legacy of Hegel which coincided with the development of capitalism and the bourgeoisie in Germany. And given the state of censorship at the period in which Metternich, the Austrian Chancellor crushed all liberal and national movements in German-speaking lands (through the German Bund formed in 1815), the debate was fought out in the obscure language of philosophy.

Most of Hegel's critical followers, the young Hegelians, were rooted out of the Prussian universities after the accession of Frederick William IV in 1840. This included Marx's own mentor Bruno Bauer, and thus Marx himself. Marx now turned away from the academic life to journalism. As a contributor, and later, editor, of the *Rheinische Zeitung* after 1841, Marx admitted that it was an important step on the road to his acceptance of communist ideas and what we now call historical materialism.

I experienced for the first time the embarrassment of having to take part in discussions on so-called material interests.
Preface to his Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (1843)

First though he had to settle accounts with his philosophical past. His experience of the conditions of the working class (as seen in his article on the "Debate on the Law on the Thefts of Timber" in October 1842) itself sharpened his attack not only on Hegel but also on his followers.

This was not something that occurred overnight. Marx was never content with the superficial (hence why after nearly several decades of gestation his project for *Capital* was never completed!). He had read Hegel very carefully, and had initially tried to reject Hegel's thinking altogether, but, after intense study, he had succumbed to the powerful dialectical method Hegel employed. However, when he too realised the implications of Hegel's ideas, he joined the Young Hegelians who were beginning to criticise the master's thinking. Marx, however,



Ludwig Feuerbach
1804 - 72

saw consciousness only as an individual phenomenon.

soon began to diverge from them too, since they accepted Hegel's idealist conception of the dominance of ideas over reality. When Ludwig Feuerbach, in his "Preliminary Theses for the Reform of Philosophy" criticised Hegel's method as a "mystification" and put real flesh and blood human beings rather than God at the centre of philosophy, Marx enthusiastically greeted his work.

However, even Feuerbach's materialism did not fully satisfy Marx's own developing views. In 1843, Marx was not yet a communist and was collaborating with Arnold Ruge on the *Deutsche-Französische Jahrbucher*.

Marx's second contribution to this was his "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right". He starts this article by announcing once again the debt of German philosophers to Feuerbach

For Germany the criticism of religion has been essentially completed and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism.

But then he goes on to say that religion does not arise as a "false consciousness" as Feuerbach has it. Religion arises because of the ways in which human beings have hitherto organised their social and political existence.

The basis of irreligious criticism is: man makes religion, religion does not make man. But man is not an abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, the state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an inverted consciousness of the world because they are in an inverted world.

Religion offered thus both a justification of the existing order and a source of consolation and rejection of it. The famous passage on it being the "opium of the people" is often merely interpreted as a statement of atheism but it went much deeper and was also an expression of the materialist basis of Marxism.

The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against that world whose spiritual aroma is religion. Religious suffering is the expression of real suffering and at the same time

the protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of the heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. .. The criticism of religion is thus in embryo a criticism of the vale of tears whose halo is religion.

Marx did not write much more on religion after this (another job left for Engels). The reason is clear. With the pronouncement in the same work that,

Religion is only the illusory sun that revolves around man so long as he does not revolve about himself,

Marx could now concentrate on what was the real issue of how human beings achieve their emancipation. Marx could not fall into the trap of the Young Hegelians by simply insisting that the world would change because their idealism was more rational than Hegel's. Marx criticised this view in yet another letter to Ruge.

We do not then set ourselves opposite the world with a doctrinaire principle, saying "here is the truth, kneel down here!" It is out of the world's own principles that we develop for it new principles. We do not say to her, "stop your battles, they are stupid stuff. We want to preach the true slogans of battle at you." We merely show it what it is actually fighting about, and this realisation is a thing it must make its own even though it may not wish to.

The reform of consciousness consists solely in letting the world perceive its own consciousness by awaking it from dreaming about itself, in explaining to it its own actions.

Correspondence (to Arnold Ruge), September 1843, in D. McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (OUP 1977), pp 37-8

This is an essential element of Marx's views of the inter-relationship of ideas and activity. They were both the product of human history. In the Preface to *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels basically take the piss out of the Young Hegelian's idealistic method.

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their ideas about their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their heads They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man: says the second, to take up the critical attitude to them, say the third, to knock them out of their heads; and – existing reality will collapse.

Just in case anyone is doubting this is irony, Marx and Engels tell us that these are the innocent and child-like fancies of the Young Hegelians. They hammer the point about their idealism home with a further piece of satire.

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed of the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say, by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistics brought him new and manifold evidence. This honest fellow was the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany.. .

The German Ideology in *Karl Marx Selected Writings* ed D. McLellan pp 159-160

By now Marx had a problem. How could Germany, which had a developed philosophy but a backward social structure, participate in the emancipation of humanity?

The weapon of criticism obviously cannot replace the criticism of weapons. Material force must be overthrown by material force. But theory also becomes material force when it grips the masses.

But

In Germany, by contrast, where practical life

is as mindless as mental life is impractical, no class in civil society has any need or capacity for general emancipation until it is forced to by its immediate condition, by material necessity, by its very chains.

It only needed Marx to link together his theoretical evolution with his experience in dealing with “material questions” on the Rheinische Zeitung to discover that the class he was talking about was the working class, the proletariat. The only possibility for real emancipation lay

in the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society; a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having universal character because of its universal suffering... a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity. The dissolution of society as a particular class is the proletariat.

It is no accident that Marx was to be the theoretical leader of communism but he became so not just from his own quest to understand how human society had changed and would change over time. It was also due to the incipient rise of the proletariat at that time. Marx moved towards communism after he had gone to Paris and made contact with workers and the early French socialists in October 1843. Marxism as a method thus arose as a reflection of the growth of capitalism in Europe. The proletariat were identified as the really revolutionary class not as a sentimental whim, and even less because they were a simple Hegelian ideal antithesis, but because the proletariat above all was the one class of flesh and blood mortals which represented the very opposite of private property. And, in recognising the potential of the working class, Marx also gave to the proletariat the scientific basis for its own emancipation.

Historical Materialism

In the light of the above Marx made it clear that their world-view was exactly the opposite of the idealism of Hegelianism. In an afterword to the second German edition of *Capital* in 1873 Marx explained that Hegel's exposition of the dialectic was

standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell

He went on to explain how his materialism was the direct opposite of Hegel's idealism

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e. the process of thinking, which, under the name of ‘the Idea’, he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of ‘the Idea’. With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

[See <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/p3.htm>]

But long before this he had set out his historical materialist ideas more positively.

The German Ideology thus begins

The premises from which we begin are not arbitrary ones, not dogmas but real premises from which abstraction can be made only in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity. These premises can thus be verified in a purely empirical way.

Karl Marx: *Selected Writings* (ed. D. McLellan) p.160

This is why Marxism can never be compared to a religion. Religion requires only faith and its premises are unchallengeable. But every statement of Marxism has to be verified in the real world.

And this real world is dominated by human beings' need to solve the basic problems of existence.

The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals ... (they) can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence.

This and the famous passage in the *Preface* to the *Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy* are the basic statements of historical materialism. However they are only “basic”. Marx carries on the discussion to point out that the reproduction of material life is not just a mechanical process (as the Stalinists were to maintain in the 1930s). It is also the real life of these individuals and is historically conditioned by time and place.

The way in which men produce their



An 1843 cartoon in protest at Prussian censorship of the Neue Rheinische Zeitung showing Marx as Prometheus bound, not to a rock, but to a printing press.

means of subsistence depends first of all on the nature of the actual means of subsistence they find in existence and have to reproduce. This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the production of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather it is a definite form of the activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part.

(loc. cit. p.161)

And this is not all. In contrast to Feuerbach and other bourgeois materialists, who saw consciousness as an individual phenomenon resulting from the impact of sense perception, physical and even metabolic factors (e.g. diet)² on the isolated human being, Marx saw that variations in consciousness were due to their activity as human beings collectively in a society.

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation or social stage and this mode of co-operation is itself a “productive force”.

The German Ideology in *Marx: Selected Works* (ed. McLellan) p.166

Again this is one of the main criticisms of Feuerbach's materialism

IX. The highest point attained by contemplative materialism, that is

materialism that does not understand sensuousness as practical activity, is the contemplation of single individuals in "civil society".

Theses on Feuerbach in McLellan edition.

Consciousness would not only vary historically but also through social relations and class position. Consciousness is thus not derived from the world individually as in bourgeois materialism but is a social and collective product.

The sum total of these relations of production constitute economic structure of society, the real foundation... to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness... It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but their social being which determines their consciousness.

Preface to the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy in MESW Vol 1.p 363. Our emphasis added.

Finally, in establishing the differences between historical materialism and bourgeois materialism, Marxist materialism is dialectical. Whereas bourgeois materialists saw individual human beings as passively receiving sensory imprints, which were then physiologically translated into consciousness, Marx argued that this was a "vulgar materialism". In reality, the raw material of experience is actively restructured by its recipients through thought (and since thought has a historical dimension, it also acts as part of the process of the development of consciousness), and they in turn react back on their experience. Consciousness is not a direct product of experience but an indirect one. Consciousness is structured by and mediated by already existing patterns of understanding and thought. This is the meaning of the first of the *Theses on Feuerbach*

I. The chief defect of all previous materialism (including that of Feuerbach) is that things (Gegenstand) reality, the sensible world, are conceived only in the form of the objects (Objekt) of observation, but not as human sense activity, not as practical activity..

Theses on Feuerbach from the Bottomore and Rubels edition [Original emphases].

Consciousness, therefore, has to have a social and an historical dimension. It was to underline this inter-relation of thought and practice at this point that Marx later adds the famous thesis that

XI. The philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways, the point is to change

it.

But changing the world is the key to the issue. Marx's critique of German philosophy as "ideology" (in this sense, just speculation about human history) was worthless unless he could explain how the process of change could come about. In order to distance himself from the idealists Marx made it clear that Communism wasn't just a sentimentally pleasant idea nor was it dreamed up in his head.

Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.

The German Ideology loc cit p.171

However materialism seemed to have erected a barrier to its own conclusions. The premises might have existed but where was the material movement? A few pages later Marx seems to offer no hope of proletarian emancipation at all.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

loc cit., p 176

The truth of this statement is all too obvious in our own time where a handful of media magnates faithfully produce pap for the defence of their class interests on a daily basis. But if this is the case how can communism become "the real movement" in any shape or form? The answer given by Marxism and the proletariat will be examined in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Hegel borrowed the method of the dialectic from Socrates (as understood by Aristotle). Both believed that the method was based on revealing the inherent contradiction in existing ideas. Hegel saw this as a three-fold process in which the Abstract initial notion would be challenged by its Negative and the final resolution would give rise to a final Concrete form.

2 Summed up on the famous aphorism of Feuerbach "Man is what he eats" which was translated into the plot of the stage play of

Buchner's *Woyzeck*.

2

How Working Class

Consciousness Develops

The communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.

The Communist Manifesto

At the end of the first chapter we left readers with an apparent contradiction in Marxist views on consciousness. Whilst Marx, on the one hand, could declare in the Provisional Rules of the First International that,

...the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves.¹

he had earlier seemed to offer no hope of proletarian emancipation at all.

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.

The German Ideology p.176²

It is generally true that in all class societies the ideas of the ruling class dominate and yet society changes and the ruling classes are overthrown. How does this occur?

The Development of Bourgeois Class Consciousness

While the ideas of the ruling class are generally the ruling ideas in society it is obvious that their domination can never be total. The material reality of class society, with its inherent conflicts and insoluble contradictions, is continually generating the basis for ideas which oppose those of the ruling class. It is not classes as such which challenge the received ideology but the struggle between them that generates, at certain points in history, the ideas of both the exploited and the exploiting class.

Lets start with our current class enemy. How did the bourgeoisie begin its rise to domination under feudalism? The bourgeoisie began life as mere supplicants under feudalism. Monarchs and local aristocrats gave them charters with rights to set up markets and to produce outside the system of serfdom because they provided goods and services which the feudal military system could not. They themselves accepted restrictions on trade via the guilds in order to protect their own wealth. But when that wealth had reached such a proportion that it dwarfed the aristocracy's landed wealth they began to demand more. They demanded an end to feudal restrictions on the growth of their wealth (internal customs duties, tax immunity for the aristocracy etc.). When feudal society responded by refusing to honour their contribution to the state because of their "low birth", then the bourgeoisie unfurled the ideological banner of "freedom" and became the standard

bearer of the anti-feudal forces in the Third Estate.

The bourgeoisie didn't say that their "liberty" was only liberty for the property owner. They didn't say only those who actually owned a bit of the country's wealth could be citizens. Freedom for them meant freedom of trade, freedom to exploit labour unlimitedly and freedom to control the press so that ultimately once the bourgeoisie had fully got its hands on the levers of state power it could even concede universal suffrage confident in the knowledge that it was no threat to their property interests. The proletariat which did its share of fighting and dying in the struggle against feudalism was now told that freedom had been won and there was no need for any further struggle.

But what was "the end of history" for our bourgeoisie was only the beginning for the proletariat. Right up to the present day the material reality of capitalist society, however the bourgeoisie, consciously or not, attempt to hide it, conflicts with the capitalist ideology they propound. While we are told of capitalism's wonderful virtues, such as efficiency, justice, harmony with human nature and so forth, the proletariat experiences unemployment, deprivation, exploitation and war. This creates the basis for ideas which begin to challenge capitalist ideology. At first these ideas are only concerned with the self-definition of the proletariat as a class. As Marx put it in *The Communist Manifesto*,

But with the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more ... the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (Trades Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the conflict breaks out into riots.³

From Class in Itself to Class for Itself

But this is only workers defining themselves as a social entity, as a class. This is what Marx called the class in itself (in *The Poverty of Philosophy*). It is not yet a class acting as fully conscious of how it can really achieve its own emancipation. He made this clear in *Wages, Price and Profit* written in 1865. Here he first

argued that workers had to fight to exist as a class. If they didn't they would be degraded to one level mass of broken wretches past salvation.⁴

At the same time although he later told German trades union leaders that "trades unions are schools of socialism", he made it clear that they were conservative in nature, and that it was in becoming socialists that workers took on their real class viewpoint. He went on to warn that;

the working class ought not to exaggerate to themselves the ultimate working of these everyday struggles. They ought not to forget that they are fighting with effects, but not with causes of those effects; that they are retarding the downward movement, but not changing its direction, that they are applying palliatives but not curing the malady. They ought, therefore, not to be exclusively absorbed in these unavoidable guerrilla fights incessantly springing up from the never-ceasing encroachments of capital or changes in the market. They ought to understand that, with all the miseries it imposes upon them, the present system simultaneously engenders the material conditions and the social forms necessary for an economical reconstruction of society. Instead of the conservative motto "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work" they ought to inscribe on their banner the revolutionary watchword "Abolition of the wages system!"⁵

In other words they have to become a class for itself. This means a class which is not only a social category resisting capitalism but recognises programmatically what it has to

do to in order to replace capitalism with a society built in its own image. Here we should pause a minute just to clarify our categories. Obviously "class consciousness" can refer to a whole range of attitudes and ideas. In real life these cannot be simply categorised into straightforward stages through which a class progressively passes in linear fashion. Real life is obviously a lot messier than any scientific attempt to make sense of it. However it is clear that there is world of difference between a strike against an attempt to lower wages and a mass struggle which calls for the overthrow of a ruling caste. They are two fundamentally different propositions. In this chapter we have defined the everyday economic struggle as the expression of class instinct. Without it there would be no class consciousness of any kind. The struggle which articulates the proletariat's path to emancipation however we have called class consciousness in its fullest sense, i.e. communist consciousness.

However, as we argued in the first part of this chapter the acquisition of this level of class consciousness, which goes beyond mere recognition of class identity, is not something that happens directly or automatically. If that were the case the mystery would be why the revolution had not happened years ago (and of course, the academic defenders of the capitalist order frequently resort to this argument when trying to scoff at the idea of the class struggle, the historic role of the proletariat or historical materialism).

This kind of class consciousness was not automatically acquired by the bourgeoisie either. They started out by simply defending the particular form of property they owned

against the feudal constraints on their social advance. If, as in Great Britain, the aristocrats let the merchants enjoy a similar social status and inter-married with them then the bourgeoisie took over the state via a long process (which was not without its bloodshed - think only of the English Civil War and the execution of Charles I). When, on the other hand, the aristocracy tried to keep or return the bourgeoisie to their former subservient status then the bourgeoisie began to clothe themselves in the rationale of the Enlightenment. "Liberty, fraternity, equality" are fine phrases for mobilising society against the old order but once victory was won the proletariat and the other dominated classes in capitalist society found that these ideas had only limited application. "Equality" meant only equality before the law which means that those who can afford it get more justice than those who cannot. But this limited notion of freedom leads in part to the formation of the proletariat's own alternative.

The bourgeoisie therefore did not merely arrive at social and political domination through following their class instincts. They also had to articulate their own programme of the world they would like to build in their own image. Nineteenth century liberalism became the bourgeois ideology, the real expression of its full class consciousness. Little wonder those bourgeois today who hanker to recover that "lost world" have adopted "neo-liberalism" as the decadent version of their old ideology!

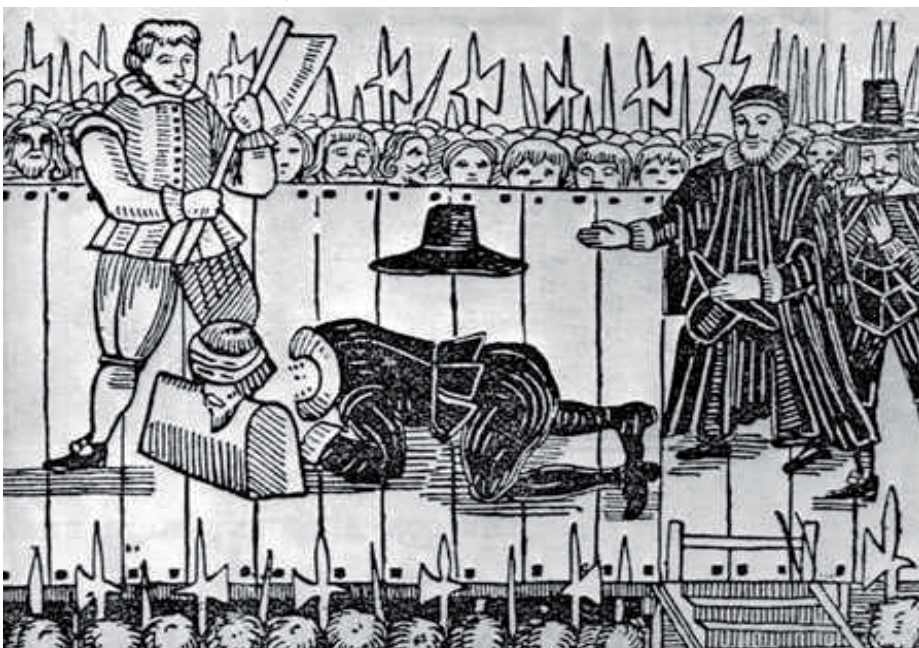
For the proletariat the situation is different and, in one sense, more difficult. The proletariat is not trying to defend a particular form of property. It is the negation of private property. This not only explains why it is the only class truly capable of emancipating all humanity but also why it arrives at its form of class consciousness in a radically different way. It cannot build up its power base in the old society through first creating economic forms of domination and then fighting for political power, as the bourgeoisie did. The proletariat

cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life.⁶

This means that the proletariat must fight for political power first. As it says in the *Communist Manifesto*

...the first step in the revolution by the working class must be to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class.⁷

Its class consciousness thus has ultimately to take a political dimension. However this



The execution of Charles 1 outside his own Banqueting Hall in 1649 was part of the process of the forging of a bourgeois revolution in England and Scotland.

political dimension can only arise from the actual experience of the proletarian movement in a struggle in which it forges first its identity, then its purpose.

*Not in vain does it go through the stern but steeling school of labour. The question is not what this or that proletarian, or even the whole of the proletariat at the moment considers as its aim. The question is what the proletariat is, and what, consequent on that being, it will be compelled to do.*⁸

Party and Class Consciousness

In general, under normal conditions of capitalist domination, the class struggle takes the form of the "guerrilla struggles" here or there against the effects of capitalism. This often leads workers in one place to become more militant than workers in another and leads them to begin to question the existing order. This means that class consciousness (i.e. the idea that capitalism has to be overthrown and replaced by communism) can only be achieved by a minority, and one that is scattered throughout the class. Here we must not get caught up in the post-Russian Revolution debate about who belongs to this minority (we will deal with that later) but Marx was clear that it was a political movement.

Just as the economists are the scientific representatives of the bourgeois class, so the Socialists and Communists are the theoreticians of the proletarian class.

These theoreticians though are at first "utopians" who "go in search of a regenerating science". What transforms them into revolutionaries is the actual revolutionary movement of the working class.

*But in the measure that history moves forward, and with it the struggle of the proletariat assumes clearer outlines, they no longer need to seek science in their minds; they only have to take note of what is happening before their eyes and to become its mouthpiece... From this moment, science, which is the product of the historical movement, has associated itself consciously with it, has ceased to be doctrinaire and has become revolutionary.*⁹

In other words socialist or communist ideas can only gain wider acceptance in periods of acute social crisis when capitalism's contradictions erupt in a direct way leading to massive struggles of the working class. A significant minority will only achieve communist consciousness through a whole

series of battles and partial defeats in which the issues are ever more clearly posed. The practical struggle and comprehension of that struggle is what can produce a changed consciousness. As Marx wrote,

*The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice.*¹⁰

The practical movement of revolution is the only force able to challenge the ideas of the bourgeoisie on a mass scale and produce wider communist, or class, consciousness.

*Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness, and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of human beings on a 'mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew...'*¹¹

In other words before revolution breaks out communist consciousness is only attained by a minority of the class. It is the act of revolution which turns this into the necessary mass consciousness of the class. Necessary because communism cannot be built by a minority. Because it is a totally new system of production, it has to be the work of the mass of the class since it is their self-activity which distinguishes the communist mode of production from all previous modes of production.

However this still hasn't fully answered the question posed at the beginning, nor does it explain how the scattered experience of the working class can be drawn together to prepare for a time when revolution is on the agenda. Marx did not shirk this one. For him

*The organisation of the proletariat into a class and consequently into a political party...'*¹²

is entirely logical. How else would those who had already arrived at an understanding that the whole thrust of the proletariat's struggle led in the direction of communism organise themselves and fight to extend those ideas to other workers? At this point too Marx has no hang-ups about class origins of Communists.

Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a



The cover of the first German edition of the Communist Manifesto (February 1848). It carries the internationalist slogan, 'Proletarians of All Lands, Unite!'

*section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.*¹³

This is, of course, before the negative experience of the Bolshevik Party in the Russian Revolution had sullied the very idea of a proletarian party. Thus, to return to the quote at the top of this text, when Marx wrote that

"... the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working classes themselves",

he wasn't lining up with future councilists against future "vanguardists". This quotation itself comes from the rules for the establishment of the First International, the first attempt at an international party of the working class. What he was arguing here was that the proletariat had to form their own political party which was not under the influence of this or that bourgeois faction (he was particularly aiming at English trades unionists who still maintained support for the Liberal Party of Gladstone!). It was the task of this political party to continually make sense of the workers' own struggles and to cast them back into those struggles in the form of a programme of total emancipation or, as we would say, a communist programme.

As Marx had earlier argued, ideas themselves became a material force when they were joined to the actual ongoing struggle of the class. This is why Marx and Engels

made several attempts to form political organisations which raised the banner of communism. From the Communist League in 1848 to the First International in 1864 and the German Social Democratic party in 1875. That they encouraged all three but ultimately found them all unsatisfactory was not a testimony to their fickleness but to the undeveloped nature of the class movement in the nineteenth century. Whilst it was one thing to identify the general philosophical framework in which the changing of ideas and conditions can be brought about, the "real movement" had to be tested out in the crucible of working class experience. It is to this we turn in Chapter Three.

Notes

1 Taken from Karl Marx *The First International and After* [Pelican Classics, 1974] p. 82

2 Throughout this publication we use the version in D. McLellan (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* Oxford University Press, 1977]

3 McLellan op.cit. p.228

4 *Wages, Prices and Profit* in Marx/Engels Selected Works in One Volume, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980 p. 225

5 *op.cit.* pp.225-6. The emphases are by Marx. The "schools of socialism" quote can be found in the same work p.538. As McLellan rightly notes "*its strictures on political parties were to some extent influenced by the situation prevailing in Germany at that time*" where many workers were under the influence of Ferdinand Lassalle's reformist dogmas.

6 *The Holy Family* in McLellan op. cit p.135

7 *The Communist Manifesto* in McLellan p.237

8 *The Holy Family* in McLellan op. cit p.135

9 *The Poverty of Philosophy* in McLellan op.cit p.212

10 *Theses on Feuerbach* in McLellan p.156

11 *The German Ideology* in McLellan p.179

12 *The Communist Manifesto* in McLellan p.228

13 *loc. cit* p.229

3

Marx, Engels and Proletarian Organisation

In the previous chapter we demonstrated that the notion of a political organisation of the working class is not an artificial construct but arises from the very class nature of the proletariat. The working class does not have a property system to defend. It cannot therefore extend its consciousness simply by defending its immediate material interests. Its consciousness is formed in its struggle and this, by the nature of the struggle, is often partial, fragmentary and episodic. It rises in one area as it falls in another. The economic struggle against capital, though, leads to some workers reflecting and acting on their experience in different ways. Those who recognise that the struggle for wages is not the real outcome, but that the struggle to end the wages system is, are forced to systematically organise around a programme which contains the lessons of the proletariat's experience up to that point.

This poses the question of a political organisation and in the terms of the nineteenth century this meant a political party. The term "party" had its origins in an insult made by the rising bourgeoisie against those who supported one aristocratic gang against another. A "man of party" was by definition anti-patriotic. But the bourgeoisie were not averse to organising themselves into parties.

Originally in the French Revolution all the leading political elements joined the same club. But, as the question of what to replace the Old Order with its different bourgeois interests, especially once the "vulgar mob", started to take part in proceedings then this club (nicknamed the Jacobins) fractured and the constitutional monarchists (Feuillants) and Republican rich (Girondins) split from the more petty bourgeois, Parisian-based Jacobins. Even these were not parties in the sense we would understand today since they had only a vague ideology, and the Jacobins were split into factions like the Robespierrists and the so-called Indulgents or Dantonists.

It was only with the setting up of voting systems (originally with restricted franchises) that we get the bourgeois party as a vote gathering machine proper which developed in the period 1815-70. Does this mean that we have to agree with Otto Rühle that "all parties are bourgeois"? His conclusion was based on his experience not only of how the Bolshevik Party became the instrument of counter-revolution in Russia, but even more, on his longer experience of the political conditions inside German social democracy. It is the problems which arise in the period of social democracy, the first arises when workers are really organised into political parties as such

that we have to look to understand some of the issues which confront us today.

However, before we get to this point we cannot ignore the actual experience of the working class in the lifetime of Marx and Engels. It might seem useless to refer to them for an answer to the present day issues about how proletarian class consciousness achieves an organised form, but it is equally inaccurate to argue that they were indifferent to the issue of a political organisation. This is clear even before the famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* of 1848. The year before in *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx laid out the basic path to class consciousness of the modern proletariat. Taking the English proletariat as his material example he noted that:

If the first aim of resistance was merely the maintenance of wages, combinations, at first isolated, constitute themselves into groups as the capitalists unite for the purposes of repression, and in the face of always united capital, the maintenance of the association becomes more necessary to them than that of wages ... In this struggle — a veritable civil war — all the elements necessary for a coming political battle unite and develop. Once it has reached this point association takes on a political character.

*Economic conditions had at first transformed the mass of people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is already a class as against capital **but not yet for itself**. In the struggle, of which we have noted only a few phases. This mass becomes united, and constitutes itself as a class for itself. The interests it defends become class interests. But the struggle of class against class is a **political struggle**.*

The Poverty of Philosophy in D. McLellan, K. Marx: *Selected Writings* p. 214.

But if class struggle ultimately was political struggle what was the vehicle for this struggle? Workers did not wait long for an answer. In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx announced to the world that

It is high time that Communists should openly, in the face of the whole world publish their views, their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the spectre of Communism with a Manifesto of the party itself.

McLellan *op. cit.* p.222

It should be noted that the word "party" at this point has no capital letter. Marx is talking

of a trend not an actual body. Although the Communist League which sponsored the Manifesto was real enough it did not have any exaggerated view that it was already a real force. But in the *Manifesto* Marx makes it quite clear that "class for itself" means the formation of a political party. When discussing the class struggle between capital and labour he states that:

The real fruit of their battle lies, not in the immediate result, but in the ever-expanding union (here meaning "unification" not trades union) of the workers.

Once again, however, "every class struggle is a political struggle" so the result is

The organisation of the proletariat into a class and consequently into a political party... ibid p.228

Of course, in 1848 no such party actually existed, and the statements about that party and its relation to the working class have to be taken as propagandist rather than definitive. However, this did not stop Marx and Engels from trying to develop the Communist League from its semi-Jacobin origins into a real organisation of the working class. To this end they sought the widest possible appeal. Thus they wrote that

The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working class parties ... the Communists ... are ... the most advanced and resolute sections of the working class parties of every country.

The fact that they had only the vaguest outlines of what a proletarian party would have to look like at this early point in working class history does not invalidate the view that they saw the need for the most advanced proletarians to maintain a permanent political association. Otherwise why would it be necessary to assert that the Communists,

have over the great mass of the proletariat that advantage of clearly understanding the line of march.
op. cit. p. 231

Marx and Engels underlined the need for political clarity in the third part of the Manifesto where they subject all the trends that had up until that time claimed to represent the working class to critical scrutiny. St Simon, Owen, Proudhon, Cabet, Fourier, etc. are all put under the magnifying glass of withering criticism and dismissed. The idea that the Communists do not set themselves up in opposition to other working class parties did not mean, even at

this early stage, that anyone calling themselves "socialist" was accepted as such. In a sense it is a taste of the political debates ahead as the proletariat tries to define itself against capital and develops a materialist worldview which went beyond paternalism and utopianism. The Manifesto recognised quite clearly the twin themes at the heart of the development of working class consciousness. It recognised that communism was an entirely different mode of production which could only come about when that communist consciousness had spread to a majority of the workers.

All previous historical movements were movements of minorities, or in the interests of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority.
ibid. p.230

But it also underlined the role of the Communists as the only fully conscious members of the proletariat. They were the ones who understood the "line of march" of the whole proletariat. They represented the future that all proletarians would eventually have to attain if capitalism were to be overthrown.

This, of course begged a few questions about precisely at what stage the consciousness of communism would spread to the wider class movement, but this was a question which was only clearly posed later, during the period of social democracy at the turn of the century. In the 1840s and 1850s Marx and Engels were more interested in the development of the class movement as a whole as it was still in its infancy. They had participated in, and even led, the Communist League, but when they saw that the possibility of proletarian revolution would have to be postponed to the distant future, they had no hesitation in breaking with those in the League who thought that the next revolution was near, and would be proletarian.

However, although they split with the Willich-Schapper group in the Communist League in 1850, they did not simply retire to the study. Both maintained a continuous correspondence with all the elements in Germany, and elsewhere, who would one day contribute to a new proletarian organisation. Even Schapper was reconciled to Marx within a few years when it was clear that Marx's perspective on revolution was right. It is also a bit of a myth that *Capital* was written in isolation from the debates within the working class during this period. What Marx and Engels did try to avoid was the petty squabbles of the various small groups that did appear in this period. They did not



Pierre-Joseph Proudhon
1809-65

attack people like Lassalle too strongly despite his rejection of economic struggles (thus turning the struggle for socialism into something religious rather than based on what was really going on) despite his offers to do deals with the Prussian state. Thus until the foundation of the First International in 1864 they virtually kept themselves silent during all the political infighting between the various tendencies in the international proletarian movement.

The First International

The contacts Marx and Engels maintained were to be absolutely central to their rise to dominance over the First International after 1864. However their involvement in this body was initially almost an accident.

The International Working Men's Association arose out of the narrow desire of English trades unionists to prevent French workers breaking English strikes and the Emperor of France's desire to demonstrate his paternal regard for his workers by subsidising a delegation to visit the London International Exhibition in 1862. This delegation of French workers (mainly followers of Proudhon) took part in a conference with the English trades unionists and agreed to set up an International Working Men's Association. Also invited to the first meeting were delegations from foreign workers living in London including those who supported bourgeois nationalists like the Mazzinians, as well as French republicans.

Marx was eventually invited to write its main documents (the *Inaugural Address* and the *Provisional Rules*) and realised he would have to be very skilful to keep this disparate

alliance together, especially as the English were hostile to the very idea of politics being brought into the organisation.

These documents are thus no ringing declaration of the principles of scientific communism like the *Communist Manifesto* was. Marx himself wrote of the need for a "gentle style". Marx tried to direct the participants away from trades union demand issues to the greater political issues. This is why he includes the line

To conquer political power has therefore become the great duty of the working classes.

This may be self-evident today but it was intended to set down a benchmark to make the English trades unionists in the International widen their perspectives. He also skilfully praised the internationalist actions of the English working class in the face of such issues as fighting slavery in the U.S. Civil War (where they had come out against the South despite the fact that the loss of cotton from its slave plantations cost them jobs). Marx hoped that the aristocracy of labour represented in the English New Model unions of the time would take on the task of organising the whole working class but their particularist trade mentality disappointed him. After 1867 the Reform Act led many trades unionists to throw in their lot with the Liberal Party (precisely what Marx hoped to avoid when he wrote the Draft Rules). William Cremer, general secretary of the International, eventually became a Liberal MP. In the previous chapter we looked at how Marx and Engels theoretically understood the limitations of trades union activity and the economic struggle. But during the course of the First International they came to recognise that

The trade union movement, among all the big, strong and rich trade unions, has become more an obstacle to the general movement than an instrument for its progress ...

Letter of Engels to E. Cafiero (1871) quoted in Hal Draper, *Karl Marx's Theory of Revolution*, Volume II p.107

It was also against the English trades unionists, as well as the French Proudhonists, that Marx wrote the line that has been quoted out of context by the worshippers of spontaneity ever since

That the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.

Provisional Rules in K.Marx, *The First*

International and After (Pelican 1974), p.82

This was an argument for a party and for political action. It was aimed at those who argued that the aim of the International Working Men's Association was just to defend workers' living conditions and against those who looked to bourgeois parties to help them. Proletarian autonomy meant having their own political instrument that was based on their consciousness and their programme.

However, at the beginning Marx's subtleties were too much for the English trades unionists, who were satisfied with his Address and his rules, so Marx now had a base of support within the International with which to deal with the French Proudhonists. At this point Marx and Engels were highly optimistic about the future of the International. On September 11th 1867 Marx could write to Engels

... At the next Congress I shall personally deliver a knock-out blow to these Proudhonist jackasses. I have managed the whole thing diplomatically and did not want to come out personally until my book (Capital - ed.) was published and our Association had struck root... The scoundrels among the English trades unionists who thought we went "too far" now come running to us ... Things are moving and in the next revolution, which is perhaps nearer than it appears, we (i.e., you and I) will have this powerful engine in our hands...

Marx-Engels, *Selected Correspondence* (Progress Publishers 1955) p.181-2

The End of the International

Although the prediction about the future revolution took the material form of the Paris Commune in 1871, the optimism about how the International itself might act was unfounded. Whilst the Paris Commune was to further develop the working class understanding of its revolutionary tasks (the need to smash the old bourgeois state etc), the International had little organisational impact since Paris was the centre of the Proudhon faction in the International. Although the Proudhonists were no longer dominant in the International they still represented a considerable force in France where artisanal and petty bourgeois production was still widespread. Thus Proudhonist mutualist schemes had a certain resonance but in no way conflicted with the basic operation of the capitalist mode of production (Proudhon's oft-quoted line "Property is theft" sounds good but he himself argued for petty bourgeois property



Mikhail Bakunin
1814-76

and thought that equal labour exchanges were possible. He also argued that women did not enter into this concept of equal labour exchanges since their proper place was the home — a view naturally accepted by the English trades unionists!).

By 1868 the Proudhonists were all but defeated inside the General Council of the International but the looming threat then came from the anarchist Prince, Michael Bakunin. This is not the place to analyse all the extraordinary acts of Bakunin but the struggle against his manoeuvres to create an anarchist international within the International also emphasised the tension between the need to have the broadest possible appeal to workers whilst at the same time having a sufficiency of agreement on both a political and organisational level to make an international proletarian party which was capable of acting decisively. In the end the whole Bakunist episode simply helped write the obituary of the International. By the time the First International was in its death throes it was recognised that there was a need for an International which was much more programmatically coherent and organisationally centralised. In the course of the history of the International therefore the proletariat learned one lesson which was that those who professed adherence to the proletariat did not necessarily understand how to fight capitalism.

The political organisation of the class was beginning to take shape as the collective memory of the working class. It alone reflected on the class' experience and programmatically carried them forward into the next period in history. Marx and Engels themselves had come a long way from the fairly vague statements of the *Communist Manifesto*. Now they saw the need for an

organisation of the wider working class which understood revolutionary praxis. Towards the end of the life of the International, particularly after the Paris Commune, Marx had recognised that the International needed deeper roots inside the life of the working class of countries throughout the world in order to have real influence on events. This ushered in the phase which led up to the formation of Social Democracy and the Second International in 1889. This was to bring new problems and new insights on the development of revolutionary organisation. It is to these that we turn in the next chapter.

4

The Era of Social Democracy and the Fight Against Revisionism

Lessons of the First International

As we argued in the last chapter, the struggle for proletarian self-emancipation pre-supposed the existence of a political organisation, a political party. This was something Marx and Engels had understood as early as *The Communist Manifesto*. Even during the long period of class quiet in the so-called “golden years” of capitalism (1850-70) they maintained contact with other revolutionaries to prepare the time when a new organisation would once again be on the agenda.

Thus, in 1864, they had no hesitation in taking part in the formation of the First International, despite the trades union and Proudhonist prejudices of most of its founders. What the history of the First International showed was that the proletariat could not reach freedom with just any old organisation. The debates and splits inside the First International proved that it not only had to have a clearer programme (which excluded class collaborationist ideas inherited from Proudhon and the English trades unionists), but it also had to have deeper roots inside the working class of each country in order to be a real movement with clear, functioning statutes which was not subject to internal manipulation by the secret society kind of conspiracy favoured by Bakunin and his followers.

By 1868, Marx already saw a new revolutionary crisis on the horizon while the International was still a heterogeneous body of clashing interests rather than a revolutionary instrument. The remaining condition for transforming the International into a more centralised and disciplined body was a greater degree of ideological homogeneity. The Brussels Congress marked a great victory for Marx in this regard, in that he succeeded in winning over a section of the Proudhonists to his own positions and defeating the Proudhonist diehards. The stage was now set for Marx's organisational plans: at the Basle Congress of 1869 held before Bakunin's operations became evident, Marx obtained the passage of a resolution that considerably increased the powers of the General Council, in particular giving it the right to suspend, pending the decision of the Congress, branches of the International that contravened its principles and decisions.

Bakunin's secret attempts to create an organisation within an organisation, the so-called Alliance for Social Democracy, multiplied over the next two years so that by the time the London Conference met in September 1871, Marx was ready with his

resolution “Political Action of the Working Class”. This resolution, partly based on the lessons of the Paris Commune which had been crushed the previous May, reminded the International of the preamble to its own Rules which Marx had drafted in 1864. These had spoken of the need to conquer political power, and went on to define this in more concrete terms. It argued from the

presence of an unbridled reaction which . . . pretends to maintain by brute force the distinction of classes and the political domination of the propertied classes resulting from it,

that,

The working class cannot act, as a class, except by constituting itself into a political party, distinct from, and opposed to, all old parties formed by the propertied classes,

and that,

The constitution of the working class into a political party is indispensable in order to ensure the triumph of the social revolution and its ultimate end — the abolition of classes.

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1871/09/politics-resolution.htm>

But such a party isn't the product of the simple will of a few individuals, nor does it spring spontaneously from the daily struggle of the class. Whilst Marx and Engels both tried to take the IWMA from its initial limited association on to the terrain of a genuine political force they also recognised that the programme which the party would carry could be refined only in the light of proletarian experience.

The Importance of the Paris Commune

The Paris Commune of 1871 demonstrated how, in the very act of defending their own interests, the working class is the antithesis of capital. The revolutionary actions of the class led literally to revolutionary developments in its consciousness and therefore in the programme defended by its class organisations. One of the great legacies of the First International is that it recognised the real significance of the Paris Commune for the development of proletarian consciousness. By unanimously voting for the publication of Marx's *The Civil War in France* on May 30th 1871, two days after the final military defeat of the Commune, the General Council gave an internationalist



May 1871 - The Communards final fight from the heights of Montmartre.

answer to the bourgeois calumnies spread about the Commune and also made a major contribution to the development of working class consciousness.

In *The Civil War in France* Marx once again speaks with the authentic voice of the communist revolutionary, untrammelled by the need to accommodate trades unionists and Proudhonists. The Civil War in France echoes many of the ideas on consciousness put forward in *The German Ideology* but “now made flesh”.

The working class did not expect miracles from the Commune. They have no ready-made utopias to introduce par décret du peuple [by decree of the people]. They know that to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies, they will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men. They have no ideals to realise, but to set free the elements of the new society with which old, collapsing bourgeois society is pregnant. In the full consciousness of their historic mission, and with the heroic resolve to act up to it, the working class can afford to smile at the coarse invective of the gentlemen's gentlemen with the pen and inkhorn, and at the didactic patronage of well-wishing bourgeois doctrinaires, pouring forth their ignorant platitudes and sectarian crotchets in the oracular tone of scientific infallibility. When the Paris Commune took the management of the revolution in its own hands; when plain working men for the first time dared to infringe upon the governmental privilege of their “natural

superiors”; and, under circumstances of unexampled difficulty, performed their work modestly, conscientiously, and efficiently — performed it at salaries the highest of which barely amounted to one fifth of what, according to high scientific authority, is the minimum required for the secretary to a certain metropolitan school board – the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the red flag, the symbol of the republic of labour, floating over the Hotel de Ville

The Civil War in France in The First International and After (Penguin Classics 1992, pp 213-14)

What was different about the Commune was that it was the first time the working class had acted independently to establish its own form of rule,

displacing the state machinery, the governmental machinery of the ruling classes by a governmental machinery of its own

op.cit. p.262.

Marx's refusal to draw up blueprints of the precise nature of a future communist society was vindicated by the Commune. As Marx himself wrote

...it was a thoroughly expansive political form, while all previous forms of government had been emphatically repressive. Its true secret was this. It was essentially a working class government, the product of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.

op.cit. p.212

This is not the place to analyse in detail the enormous contribution the actions of Commune¹ made to the development of communist consciousness but Marx basically identified the following as new ideas on which a future proletarian political body would have to be judged. The Commune had abolished the standing army and replaced it with “the armed people”. It had introduced the idea of immediate recall of elected delegates and these delegates had no special pay or privileges. The Commune itself was not a parliament or a Ministry but a working body combining all the features of all the branches of government. On top of this the Commune established an organising principle for the whole of society from “even the smallest hamlet”. Perhaps most significantly it was what Marx considered the living embodiment of “the dictatorship of the proletariat”.

Whilst the anarchist Bakunin had derided the idea of the “dictatorship of the proletariat” by asking who was the class that the proletariat would be dictator over, Marx could reply that the dictatorship was aimed at the old ruling classes (the “slaveholders” as he called them) who would periodically threaten the real task of the Commune which was the social and economic transformation of the condition of the exploited. Marx expected that every one of these “slaveholder revolts” would actually help to speed up the process of transformation of society so that the dictatorship of the proletariat would itself wither away to become a mere coordinator of the “free movement of society”. Marx also concluded that one reason for the weakness of the Commune was its isolation to one geographical area (in fact he had warned the Communards of this danger even before March 18th). Finally, Marx concluded that the Commune had opened up a new phase in the struggle. After the Franco-Prussian War, the French ruling class had only been able to crush the Commune with the aid of their former German foes. Bismarck, the new Chancellor of a united Germany had allowed Thiers, the monarchist French President, to have his army of 40,000 to crush the workers of Paris. Marx thus concluded that

Class rule is no longer able to disguise itself in national uniform; the national governments are as one against the proletariat!

op. cit. p.232

And to underline the impact that the Commune had on the development of communist ideas, Marx and Engels added an introduction to a new German edition of the Communist Manifesto which appeared in

1872. Whilst they did not feel they could alter the old text (since it was now itself a part of proletarian history) they now stated that

...no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II ...this programme has in some details become antiquated.

quoted from Marx/Engels: *Selected Works*, one volume edition, Moscow 1968, p. 31-2.

These "antiquated details" would now include such issues as nationalisation of the means of production which the march of history has shown can be carried out to defend capitalist interests rather than advance proletarian expropriation. However this was not so apparent in 1872. The really significant change comes when Marx and Engels go on to deal with the question of the revolutionary transformation of the state.

One thing especially was proved by the Commune, viz., that "the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready made state machinery and wield it for its own purpose".

The quote is from *The Civil War in France*. From now on it was clear that the working class would have to smash the existing state in order to create a new social and economic order. As our concern here is proletarian consciousness, this is also the point to underline the fact this insight was provided by Marx himself. Whilst the Paris workers themselves died fighting trying to "storm heaven", and whilst good histories were written by participants, it was Marx who drew the conclusions from the struggle. This process came as no surprise to Marx himself. In the first place his ideas were not based "on ideas or principles that have been invented" [*The Communist Manifesto*] but on the real movement going on before the very eyes of humanity. Secondly, Marx wasn't embarrassed by the idea that a "bourgeois ideologist" like himself was articulating this message since in the conditions of the nineteenth century the bulk of the working class did not even get elementary education (initially considered too dangerous by the capitalist class). Although there were workers who did manage to overcome this handicap (such as, for example, Weitling and Dietzgen) it overwhelmingly fell to people like himself

who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.

The Communist Manifesto in D. McLellan *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* p.229.

The later debate about spontaneity and organisation in the development of class consciousness involving Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin and Luxemburg amongst others was to confuse the class origins of the theorists with the fact that the proletariat's consciousness is not acquired in a direct fashion but only by reflection on its own practice. This is one of the central arguments which confirms why the proletariat needs a permanent revolutionary organisation to carry its own collective historic memory. We will return to this issue later but we can begin by stating that the message of *The Civil War in France* was unfortunately largely lost on a new wave of proletarian leaders, in particular in Germany.

The Critique of the Gotha Programme

The "Marx party" triumphed in the First International but it was a Pyrrhic victory. Marx had hoped that the International would become a force for unity amongst the proletariat and that national sections would be formed which would affiliate to it. By 1876 both he and Engels had come to realise that the process would have to be re-started, but from solid national parties which would then affiliate to the International, so the First International was quietly buried in Philadelphia.

The collapse of the International was followed by the rise of socialist parties within each national territory. This was particularly important in Germany where the International had been weak and the proletariat had been divided between the followers of Ferdinand Lassalle and Marx's own, rather shaky, disciple, Wilhelm Liebknecht. After Lassalle's death (in a duel (!) in 1864) his party, the ADAV (German General Workers' Union), continued to support the idea that universal suffrage would bring the workers to power and if that failed the reactionary aristocratic clique at the top of the Prussian state would concede aid for workers' cooperatives. Lassalle also secretly courted Bismarck thinking that the feudal parties were the common ally of the proletariat against the industrial bourgeoisie! However it wasn't until 1869 in Eisenach that Liebknecht, with the young worker, Auguste Bebel, was able to found a rival party to the ADAV, the Social Democratic Workers Party (SDAP). Marx tried to treat both parties equally in the hope of promoting their unity but all his tact was useless in the face of the bone-headed refusal of the Lassalleans.. However both parties affiliated to the IWMA and, when the Eisenachers bravely came out against the Franco-Prussian war (with

the slogan "Not a man, not a penny, for this system"), Bismarck persecuted both parties equally. This was the basis for their unification into the German Social Democratic Workers Party at Gotha in 1875.

The phase in the workers' movement which we call Social Democracy had opened up. It was to be dominated until World War One by the Second International, founded in 1889. This was to be another major turning point in the history of the world working class as, for the first time in history, the proletariat, at least in Europe, now formed mass movements which claimed to embody a clear alternative to the prevailing capitalist societies. These new movements however did not come without their problems from the point of view of revolutionary Marxism. Marx and Engels were scathing about the lack of programmatic clarity of the Germans and were equally worried about the developments in Britain and France (one need only remember Marx's famous comment, reported by Engels to Lafargue, on the French Party that if they were his followers then "Ce qu'il y a de certain, c'est que moi, je ne suis pas marxiste". [One thing's for sure, I'm not a Marxist]).

However, it was the German party that took up the bulk of their attention. When Marx and Engels discovered that the Gotha Programme for unity was full of Lassallean "theoretical blunders" they tore it apart. For them it was a step back from the Eisenachers' own programme. Their *Marginal Notes to the Programme of the German Workers' Party* has ever since been known by its real purpose as *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Sending it to Wilhelm Bracke, Marx wrote a covering letter which makes his opinion clear in a nutshell.

...it is my duty not to give recognition, even by diplomatic silence, to what in my opinion is a thoroughly objectionable programme that demoralises the party.

Selected Works op cit p.313

But this is precisely what Marx and Engels did. Their *Critique* was not published until Engels issued it (when the SPD as again sliding towards a confused programmatic position in relation to capitalism) in January 1891. This was important, since it allowed the programmatic confusion of the SPD, which Marx said was no better than a bourgeois party ("the internationalism of the programme stands infinitely below that of the Free Trade Party" Marx, op. cit. p.323), to continue without a clear public statement of criticism. Marx, in the same letter went on to say:

Every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes. If, therefore, it was not possible – and the conditions of the time did not permit it – to go beyond the Eisenach programme, one should simply have concluded an agreement for action against the common enemy.
loc. cit.

The first sentence is often quoted in isolation by those who think that Marx was arguing for a spontaneist approach to class consciousness but in actual fact what he is doing is expressing real dismay at the programme that was agreed on. This was not a step forward in the “real movement” but a recipe for confusion, and worse. The programme of the proletarian organisation is its basic point of departure. If it is not carrying forward the gains made politically by the revolutionary working class what is it doing? What Marx was arguing for was to get the Lassalleans to work with the Eisenachers to demonstrate in actual practice their confusions before writing a new programme. Engels confirmed this in a letter to Bebel in March 1875 where he repeated all the programmatic criticisms of Marx. Most presciently he condemned the fact that

the principle that the workers' movement is an international movement is to all intents and purposes completely disavowed for the present day and that by people who have upheld this principle most gloriously for five whole years under the most difficult conditions.
op. cit. p.333

Engels is here referring to the fight against Bismarck's war on France which Liebknecht and Bebel, and the Eisenach party, had so ably led. It was the war issue which was to reveal how rotten the SPD had become in 1914. Engels concluded his letter by telling Bebel that he and Marx might have to condemn everything the new party stands for. He adds

In general, the official programme of a party is of less importance than what the party does. But a new programme is after all a banner publicly raised, and the outside world judges the party by it.
op.cit p.336

And especially a proletarian party since this is its function. More immediately significant was the problem that this banner was so multi-coloured that it did not even give a lead to the German Social Democratic Party members. This was particularly problematical in Germany where the failure

of the democratic bourgeoisie to carry out the national revolution (which was carried out by the reactionary landowning clique of Bismarck in order to preserve their aristocratic privileges) meant that many erstwhile liberals and democrats wandered into the Social Democratic Party. Marx himself had prevented a well-known lawyer from entering the General Council of the First International because he recognised that he was someone who was politically ambitious in the bourgeois sense and would bring alien class positions to the International. Whilst he had no objections to non-proletarians in general joining, he also was aware that to flood the organisation with such figures before there was a solid proletarian base, was dangerous.

The German Social Democrats had no such inhibitions and soon were swamped by a series of reactionary ideas from the so-called Katheder (professor) Socialists to Eugen Dühring's attempt to undermine the materialist interpretation of history. At first Marx and Engels tried to operate behind the scenes in personal letters. Engels explained to Bebel that in fact the “bourgeois jackasses” who commented on the Gotha Programme had not even read it therefore

So long as our opponents, as well as the workers, continue to read our views into that programme, we are justified in saying nothing about it.
Engels to Bebel Oct 12th 1875 in *Marx-Engels Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955) p.280

The Fight for Revolutionary Consciousness in the SPD

However such “tact” could not be maintained. Engels had expected that the new party would not last two years but in 1877 Marx was telling him that the Gotha Programme has “degraded the party both in theory and practice”. To F.A.Sorge he wrote

...A rotten spirit is making itself felt in our Party in Germany, not so much among the masses as among the leaders (upper class and “workers”). The compromise with the Lassalleans has led to a compromise with other halfway elements too: in Berlin (via [Johann] Most) with Dühring and his “admirers”, and moreover with a whole gang of half-mature students and super-wise Doctors of Philosophy who want to give socialism a “superior, idealistic” orientation, that is to say, to replace its materialistic basis (which demands serious objective study from anyone who tries to use it) by modern mythology with its goddesses of

Justice, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity.
Oct 19th 1877 *Selected Correspondence*,
op. cit. p.290

Thus by 1878 Marx and Engels were forced into the open to deal with these threats. This underlines three things in the development of proletarian class consciousness. As it is indirect, it has to be fought for in open debate and discussion. It is also not enough for someone to clothe themselves in the label “socialism” to be taken at their word.

Class consciousness demands class clarity. To some, the debates in the workers' movement can appear tiresome (and they often are) but without clarification about the nature and course of socialist revolution there can be no revolutionary movement. Marx and Engels are sometimes treated as if they were Aaron and Moses who it is simply enough to quote (usually out of their historical context) and that is enough. Nothing would have been more horrifying to them. As their numerous letters at this period of German Social Democracy make clear they bequeathed no system (they left that to the Herr Dührings and their intellectually lazy followers). Of these types Marx later wrote

The Party can very well manage without such intellectuals whose first principle is to teach what they have not learnt.
The “Circular Letter” September 17th-18th 1879 in *Selected Correspondence* p.307

Engels (with assistance from Marx) published his *Anti-Dühring* in 1878 denouncing the anti-materialist (and anti-semitic) Professor, but it caused a furore in the Party. Johann Most, Dühring's strongest supporter tried to ban its publication. But this was not the last battle for revolutionary clarity that Marx and Engels had to make in the German Party. In 1879 they issued a seminal document, the so called “Circular Letter”, to the various leaders of the German Party. The letter was a response to the publication of the new paper of the German Social Democratic Party, *Die Sozialdemokrat*. Due to Bismarck's anti-Socialist laws this had to be published in Zurich under an editorial board consisting of what Marx called a “social philanthropist”, Karl Hochberg “the only man to buy his way into the Party” and two followers of Dühring, one of which was the young Eduard Bernstein. They had written an article purporting to be a history of the Party until that time, but which was really an argument for abandoning revolutionary socialism and cooperating with Bismarck by working within his anti-socialist laws, since it was the SPD's own fault that they had been passed because they had been too radical! Marx and

Engels were mystified.

How the party can tolerate the authors of this article in its midst any longer is incomprehensible to us.

and then gave their own views:

As for ourselves, in view of our whole past there is only one road open to us. For almost forty years we have emphasised that class struggle is the immediate driving power of history, and in particular that the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat is the great lever of the modern social revolution; we, therefore, cannot possibly co-operate with people who wish to expunge this class struggle from the movement. When the International was formed we expressly formulated the battle-cry: The emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves. We cannot therefore cooperate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must be freed from above by philanthropic persons from the upper and lower middle classes. If the new Party organ adopts a line that corresponds to the views of these gentlemen, that is middle class and not proletarian, then nothing remains for us, much though we should regret it, but publicly to declare our opposition to it ... Selected Correspondence, op. cit. p.307

But once again Marx and Engels never carried through this threat. Indeed Bernstein had already read Anti-Dühring and claimed to be a Marxist. He came to London with Bebel to pacify the two old men and was so successful that he became the sole editor of *Sozialdemokrat*. From this base he became a leading theorist of the Party and even went on to become Engels' literary executor.

How was it that the father of revisionism should be nurtured under Engels eyes? Since Marx and Engels had always argued tactically for using parliamentary means to propagandise for socialism, some had begun to confuse means and ends. It was a confusion that Marx and Engels contributed to, because they began to see the growing mass movement of Social Democracy as encompassing the whole of the working class. At that point in history, the working class was not so much under bourgeois ideological domination as today. There were as yet few mass circulation papers aimed at the working class except those printed by Social Democrats and, of course there was no electronic mass media of any kind. In 1890, only seven years after Marx's death the German SDP won nearly one and half million

votes, making them the largest single party in Germany (and they were still illegal).

The question now was "would parliamentary methods allow the Socialist Party to take power peacefully?". Such a view stood four square against the idea of the class struggle re-iterated by Marx in the *Circular Letter* of 1879. Even where Marx had made concessions to the idea of a peaceful road to power (as in his speech in Amsterdam in 1872) he had only limited this to certain countries like England, America and, possibly, Holland. Even here he had said that this was dependent on the behaviour of the capitalist class. Everywhere else he insisted that "force must be the lever of our revolutions"². Nowhere did Marx actually state that parliamentary struggle could bring the workers to power and he even denounced the SDP leaders for their support of Bismarck's abandonment of free trade in the Reichstag.

they are so far affected by parliamentary cretinism that they think they are above criticism.

letter to Sorge Sept 19th 1879 in *Selected Correspondence* p.393

On the contrary, he pointed out repeatedly that the ruling class are unlikely to see themselves legislated out of their property without a fight.

An historical development can remain "peaceful" only so long as its progress is not forcibly obstructed by those wielding social power at the time. If in England, for instance, ... the working class were to gain a majority in parliament ... they could by lawful means, rid themselves of such laws and institutions as impeded their development ... However the "peaceful" movement might be transformed into a "forcible" one by resistance on the part of those interested in restoring the former state of affairs.

ibid

Marx is here speaking hypothetically. He could not possibly have known that the very movements which were supposed to represent the workers would be the agents for carrying the bourgeois infection of parliamentarism into the working class. Engels was to get a glimpse of it before he died. In the debate over the Erfurt Programme he had to publish the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* in order to see off the followers of George Vollmar, who wanted a parliamentary road and who wanted also to make alliances with bourgeois parties. At the same, time Engels also rebuffed the

Jugend (youth), a group of intellectuals who wanted to abandon using the parliamentary forum altogether, because this would have cut the party off from a tribune where it could make propaganda. Engels, though, never once said that socialists should or could win a parliamentary majority. He viewed parliamentary campaigns and even parliamentary successes as provoking the bourgeoisie to repression and thus paving the way for the final struggle. Commenting on the Erfurt Programme in 1891 Engels wrote that the experience of Germany proves

how totally mistaken is the belief that a ... communist society can be established in a cosy peaceful way.

Quoted in A.H.Nimitz *Marx and Engels: Their Contribution to the Democratic Breakthrough* (NY 2000) p.262

Imagine, therefore, Engels' horror when, having been asked to write a new introduction for a German version of *The Class Struggle in France* in 1895, he became a victim of Social Democratic opportunism and manoeuvring. Liebknecht published it in *Vorwärts* but cut out all references to the need for violent overthrow of the state. Engels wrote to Paul Lafargue

*...Liebknecht has just played me a nice trick. He has taken from my Introduction to Marx's articles on France of 1848-50 everything that would serve him to support the tactics of **peace at any price and of opposition to force and violence**, which it has pleased him for some time now to preach, especially at present when coercive laws are being prepared in Berlin. But I am preaching these tactics only for the Germany of today ... and [they] may become inapplicable tomorrow.*

Marx-Engels *Selected Correspondence*, op. cit. p.461 [emphasis in original].

Engels attempted to have this corrected in Kautsky's paper *Neue Zeit* but even here a key paragraph which stated that "streetfighting" would be necessary but it would "have to be undertaken with greater forces" was omitted. And, as the edition of *Neue Zeit* came out after Engels' death, he never knew how he had been distorted. Indeed, the true text was not published until the revolutionary wave had already failed in 1924. Before this happened, therefore, revolutionaries like Rosa Luxemburg had to portray themselves as disagreeing with Engels against the increasingly parliamentary-minded majority who would eventually de-nature the proletarian character of Social Democracy to the point where they voted war credits for their own governments on August 4th,

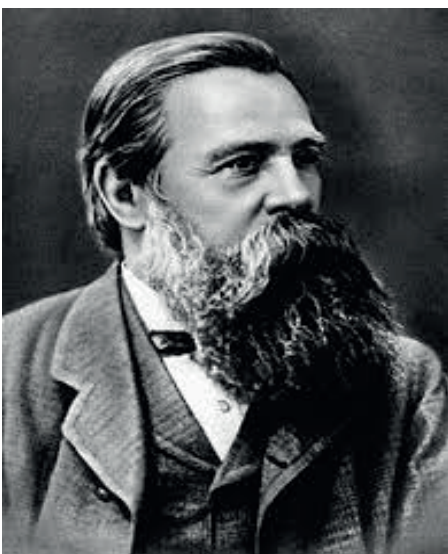
1914. At the Founding Congress of the German Communist Party (December 30th 1918 to January 1st 1919) Luxemburg made a dramatic speech which summed up what had happened to Social Democracy

Thenceforward the tactics expounded by Engels in 1895 guided the German social democrats in everything they did and in everything they left undone, down to the appropriate finish of August 4th 1914...

The fourth of August did not come out of a clear blue sky: what happened on the fourth of August was not a chance turn of affairs but was the logical outcome of all that the German socialists had been doing for many years [Hear, Hear]...after Engels' death in 1895 in the theoretical field the leadership of the party passed into the hands of Kautsky. The upshot of this change was that at every annual congress the energetic protests of the left-wing against a purely parliamentarist policy, its urgent warnings against the sterility and the danger of such a policy were stigmatised as anarchism, anarchising socialism, or at least anti-Marxism. What officially passed for Marxism became a cloak for all possible kinds of opportunism, for persistent shirking of the revolutionary class struggle, for every conceivable half measure. Thus the German social democracy, and the labour movement, the trade union movement as well, were condemned to pine away within the framework of capitalist society. No longer did German socialists and trade unionists make any serious attempt to overthrow capital's institutions or to put the capitalist machine out of gear.

From *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (Pathfinder 1970) pp 410-1

Once again we see the seminal importance



Engels in his final years found the German Social Democratic Party edited out his most revolutionary ideas.

of having a clear programmatic basis for the revolutionary working class. In this case, the distortion of Engels' real views (and those that he and Marx had fought for all their lives) became absolutely the fulcrum on which German Socialism passed over to its support for capitalism. Luxemburg sums up brilliantly a whole process that went on inside the largest party of the Second International in the passage above but it was in fact more complicated than this. With Engels dead, his close associate Bernstein once again reared his anti-Marxist head. However, he went too far for even the "parliamentary cretins" like Liebknecht and Bebel when he asserted that all Marx's major predictions about the emiseration of the working class and the increased tendency to crisis of capitalism had been disproved. In 1898 Bebel opened the official debate against him which lasted until 1904. During that time Kautsky took up the fight against Bernstein and was thus able to stand alongside the revolutionary Marxists (like Rosa Luxemburg whose *Reform or Revolution* remained the best reply to "revisionism", as Bernstein's ideas were known) as the guardian of orthodoxy.

By 1904 Bernstein was defeated but the battle against him had created an illusion that Kautsky, one of the manipulators of Engels' last writings, was now the real heir to the Marxist heritage. In actual fact (as the First World War was to prove) he actually shared the Bernstein view that socialism was possible without revolution (the two joined together in the Centrist USPD during the war).

It also further disguised another issue which Engels could not possibly have foreseen. Engels assumed that every vote for the SPD was another worker conquered for socialism. What he did not see was that the SPD, being not only ambiguous about what socialism was and how it was to be arrived at, was not itself a revolutionary body (something only proved in 1914). The historical experience of Social Democracy came to demonstrate that, under the conditions of capitalist domination, it is unlikely that the majority of workers will arrive at a vision of communism before the revolution. The mass of the class will have to reject capitalism but it is only in the process of forming a revolutionary society that the majority of workers will become fully aware of what that society involves. Marx puts it better

the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary, therefore, not only because the ruling class

cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only in a revolution succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.

The German Ideology in McLellan, op. cit. p.179

Social democracy was thus something of an illusion. Its Erfurt Programme of 1891 had contained a division between the "maximum" programme and the "minimum" programme. Whilst the former was revolutionary, calling for the overthrow of capitalism, the latter was reformist, demanding only improved conditions under capitalism. Whilst its leadership could argue about the political tactics for opposing capitalism (the maximum programme), its trades union movement, and its other bodies, could simply get on with the business of finding out how to live under capitalism.

Nor was the striving for the minimum programme the worst aspect of the situation. Social democracy, particularly at the trades union level was riddled with racism and imperialism. The speeches of union leaders like David, Legien etc., all support the idea that imperialism brings progress to "backward races". And, of course, there is only one thing worse than a class which is confused in the face of imperialist war and that is one which has a trusted leadership which has already accepted the premises of the class enemy. What the history of social democracy proved is that it is not size, but revolutionary consciousness, which is the key issue in the overthrow of capitalism. This, however, only throws into debate what the nature of a revolutionary party and its relationship to the entire class is. This was the debate that opened up on the left wing of social democracy in the years before the First World War. This forms the focus of the next chapter.

Notes

1 *There is no substitute for reading Marx's The Civil War in France* or, for a participant account M H. Lissagaray's *History of the Paris Commune*.

2 See D. McLellan *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* Oxford 1977 p595

3 For more on Social Democracy in this period, see **Internationalist Communist 11** *Social Democracy and the Working Class in Britain*, and **Revolutionary Perspectives 6** *The German Communist Left: Part One: Social Democracy*

5

On the Eve of Revolution: The Debate between Luxemburg and Lenin

The Argument So Far

We have argued that the working class is the only force which can overthrow capitalism and replace it with a mode of production based on the satisfaction of needs rather than production for profit. We have further argued that the working class has this role in the process, not through any innate moral superiority but because it is the only class which has no form of property to defend. As the ultimate exploited class its interest in the abolition of its own exploitation also means the end of all human exploitation. This lack of property however means that the proletariat is historically unique as a revolutionary class. It cannot abolish itself without first realising itself.

In other words it has to be aware of its goal and its own collective strength. This means that what the proletariat also creates as part of the process of emancipation is its own consciousness. Although this arises from the conditions of exploitation it does not arise uniformly or at the same time (otherwise capitalism would have disappeared decades ago). It arises now here, then there. Local defeats snuff it out and limited victories give it oxygen. What this constant antithesis between workers and capital creates is a body of proletarians who retain the memory of struggle and understand that the greater goal is the overthrow of the exploiting system itself. These same proletarians, an advance guard of the whole class, if you like, seek not only to generalise the memory of the last struggle but to define the programme for the future. The struggle for proletarian self-emancipation thus pre-supposes the existence of a political organisation, a political party.

However, this stated there are more questions to be answered. What is the relationship of the party to the rest of the class? What is the process by which the mass of the class itself comes to communist consciousness?

In the last chapter we looked at the experience of the development of the mass Social Democratic movement which developed after the death of Marx, and in the last years of Engels. We discussed how the movement became seduced by the possibility of arriving at power through bourgeois legality despite the fact that this stood absolutely foursquare against the revolutionary heart of Marx's thinking. We also showed that the debate on revisionism not only galvanised the left-wing of social democracy but in some ways was a sidetrack which obscured the gradual movement of social democracy into the capitalist

camp. This was not obvious until the Great War of 1914 but in the years that led up to that cataclysm the left amongst the social democrats carried out a lively and serious debate about the nature of class consciousness and political organisation. It is to this that we now turn.

A New Generation of Revolutionaries

Twenty years after the death of Marx the very nature of Social Democracy came under the scrutiny of a new generation of revolutionaries. Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (who eventually took the pen name Lenin) were both born in the Russian Empire in 1870. Both were to become in different ways icons of revolutionary Marxism (something they would have both resented). However the mythology of revolutionaries lives on after them and they are impotent to correct it after they are dead. Posterity has tended to demonise Lenin for his success and sanctify Luxemburg for her failure. In fact they not only shared the same spirit of revolutionary Marxism but they were closer in their attitudes on the questions of class consciousness and political organisation than bourgeois histories allow.

The Economic and the Political

Lenin has always been regarded as a cynical manipulator in the eyes of his critics. This largely stems from what he wrote in his famous early pamphlet *What is to Be Done?*. For his detractors the original sin of Lenin dates from his famous statement on the strikes in Russia in the 1890s.

These strikes were simply trades union struggles, not yet Social Democratic struggles. They marked the awakening antagonism between workers and employers; but the workers were not, and could not, be conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e. theirs was not yet Social Democratic consciousness...

*We have said that there **could not have been** Social Democratic consciousness among the workers. It would have to be brought to them from without. The whole history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trades union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers, and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation etc. The theory of socialism, however grew out of the philosophic,*

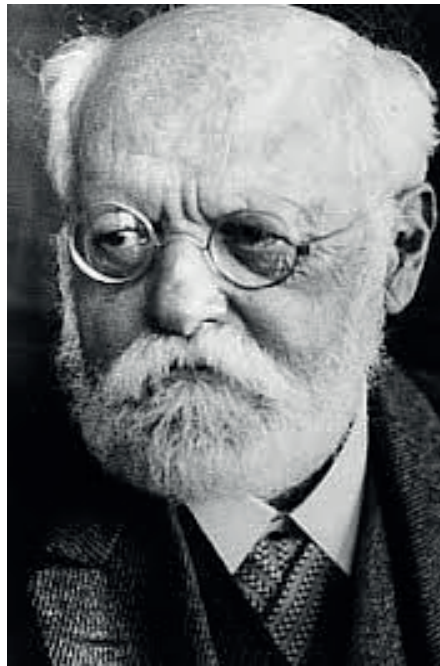
historical and economic theories elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals. By their social status, the founders of modern scientific socialism, Marx and Engels themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.

What is to be Done? Lenin *Selected Works* (3 Volumes) Vol. 1 pp. 114

From the point of view of historical materialism we obviously have to reject Lenin's formulation or at least correct it. Marx and Engels may have been educated but their scientific studies had led them away from being the "educated representatives" of any class but the proletariat. As we stated in the earlier parts of this text, Marx did not see himself as elaborating a theory but addressing the reality that confronted the society he happened to live in. His premises were real and he was quite clear that he had "gone over" to the proletariat as a result of understanding the reality of exploitation.

Lenin was in fact erroneously recycling here the arguments of Kautsky and Plekhanov about the importance of intellectuals (who in the conditions of the time had to come from the privileged classes). However the central core of truth in Lenin's views was the idea that communist (or, as he put it in the terms of the time, Social Democratic) consciousness was not a direct reflection of the immediate struggle of the working class for survival under the capitalist system. The economic struggle could continue forever unless someone or somebody put forward the real explanation as to why the proletariat was exploited. At the time only those who had the leisure and the education (clearly not workers who worked 12-14 hours a day) could elaborate those theories. But they did so on the basis of the real, existing class struggle. Lenin clearly explains this in the rest of his large pamphlet. Contrary to those who insist that Lenin was saying that workers were thick he pointed to the scientific contributions of exceptional workers like Wilhelm Weitling, and even Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. But what Lenin stresses is that they had had to escape from the shopfloor to be in a position to make their contributions. This issue then is not **who** clarifies class consciousness but **how** is that class consciousness to be carried forward.

Here Lenin is at one with the founders of scientific socialism. Class consciousness is not the direct reflection of the daily material existence of the proletariat but is an indirect product based on reflection on the lessons of the high points of proletarian struggle. Lenin, it has to be remembered, was arguing



Karl Kautsky (1854-1938)

The 'Pope' of Marxism thought that only intellectuals could be the bearers of conscious socialist ideas.

here against those trends in the nascent Russian Social Democratic movement that argued that economic struggles were the only really important ones and that politics was irrelevant. This was particularly the case with the new "younger" (Lenin and Martov, both in their early 30s, were now the "old") leaders around papers like *Rabochaya Mysl* (Workers' Thought), *Rabochye Dyelo* (Workers' Cause) and the programmatic statement *Credo*. They had arisen when the early Social Democratic organisations had been smashed by the Tsar's secret police and their leaders exiled or imprisoned. The new "leaders" were intellectuals who glorified the spontaneity of the everyday struggle but gave it no effective leadership. In fact Lenin was far from saying that workers could not take in theory. He was arguing that these "amateurs" were not giving any leadership and the workers were losing confidence in socialism because they saw these people as a menace who brought police raids in their wake. Lenin excoriated their "handicraft" methods and stated no less than six times in *What is to be Done?* that it was "the lag of leaders [behind] the spontaneous upsurge of the masses" which was causing the real crisis in working class politics in Russia.

This is a rebuttal of the myriad of lazy critics, whether anarchists, councilists or anti-working class liberals who look for any reason not to support the October Revolution. They jump from the mistaken conclusion that Lenin said the workers were "thick" to the tragic way in which the Party dictatorship replaced the proletarian

dictatorship after the Revolution of 1917, and for them, you need to say no more. The October Revolution was thus all the product of the thinking of one man. Ignored is the fact that *What is to be Done?* was written in a particular context of illegality in Tsarist Russia before the 1905 Revolution. Lenin himself, as Lars Lih has pointed out (in the preface to his 2005 work *Lenin Rediscovered, What Is to Be Done? in Context*), referred to it last in 1907, and this was only to say that

The basic mistake made by people who polemicise with What Is to Be Done? at the present time is that they tear this production completely out of a specific historical context, out of a specific and by now long past period in the development of our party. Collected Works Volume 13 p.85

What is to Be Done? plays no part in any of the discussions around the time of the Revolution. It was not referred to in *The ABC of Communism* produced by Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in 1919 and reference to it was only revived in the late 1920s when the Russian Revolution had long lost its proletarian character.

What is consistent in Lenin's thinking right up to and even beyond 1917 is that he is well aware of the real relationship between the daily struggle and the historical struggle of the working class. In 1899 he had already written

Every strike brings thoughts of socialism very forcibly to the workers' mind, thoughts of the struggle of the entire working class for emancipation from the oppression of capital... A strike, moreover, opens the eyes of the workers to the nature, not only of the capitalists, but of the government and the laws as well.

On Strikes in Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 4 pp. 315-6

Also ignored is the fact that Lenin himself, after the Bolsheviks had led the proletariat to power, continually exhorted the workers to take charge of their own destiny. Many examples can be found but one will suffice to illustrate the point here.

It is important for us to draw literally all working people into the government of the state. It is a task of tremendous difficulty. But socialism cannot be implemented by a minority, by the Party. It can be implemented only by tens of millions when they have learned to do it for themselves.

V.I. Lenin *Collected Works* Vol. 27 p.135

At the same time Lenin's arguments are no

mere historically limited, dated tirade. Some of what he writes has validity for today.

*The spontaneous development of the working class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology ... for the spontaneous working class movement is trade unionism and trades unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. But why, the reader will ask, does the spontaneous movement, the movement along the line of least resistance, lead to the domination of bourgeois ideology? For the simple reason that bourgeois ideology is far older in origin than socialist ideology, that it is more fully developed and that it has at its disposal **immeasurably** more means of dissemination.*

*Hence our task, the task of Social Democracy, is **to combat spontaneity**, to **divert** the working class movement from this spontaneous, trade unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.*

What is to be Done? Lenin Selected Works pp. 122-3

What Lenin was arguing, which remains true to today, is that the ideas, programme and platform of the party are the outcome of the total material process taking place in society, a process which is, above all, historical. The daily struggle of the class does not create this whole view any more than the abstract thinking of the greatest theorists. When the daily class struggle bursts out of the trade union struggle, out of the confines of capitalist legality into moments of insurrection, then the class movement and class consciousness take great leaps forward. But when these movements die down the experience lives on only in the one historical body which can maintain that consciousness, and this is the revolutionary political party.

This party is not something that has no relationship with the class movement. It is not a *deus ex machina*, but a central element in the dialectical and contradictory process which leads towards the formation of a communist consciousness within the working class which is directly derived from material reality. When Lenin was arguing that consciousness would have to be brought to the working class from without, he meant that this consciousness would have to be brought from outside the physical boundaries of the daily class struggle itself. He did not mean that it was outside the process taking place in society itself. As we already noted, it is true that Lenin did

quote approvingly at length from Kautsky to support his idea that spontaneity in the daily struggle was not enough to create revolutionary consciousness. This quote contained Kautsky's unashamedly elitist view that "the vehicle of science is not the proletariat but the bourgeois intelligentsia" (ibid. p.121).

According to Kautsky, it was "in the minds of this stratum" that modern socialism originated. This is, of course, fundamentally wrong and anti-Marxist, as readers of the first two chapters of this study will realise. It goes directly against what Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*. This was a period when bourgeois intellectuals, claiming to be socialist, thought they knew what was best for the working class.¹

Lenin was not particularly interested in that part of Kautsky's thinking (as his subsequent writings make clear) and had not yet realised that Kautsky was already a "renegade" to Marxism. Indeed it is quite clear that Lenin rejects this view of Kautsky in that he thought that the best candidates for professional revolutionaries were workers, the "average people of the masses" who "are capable (in fact are alone capable) of **determining** the outcome of the movement"². Today the problem is not **who** elaborates revolutionary consciousness but what is to be the **vehicle**. And that has to be a permanent political body - a political party.

The statement that the daily economic struggle does not create socialist/communist/revolutionary consciousness of itself is so obvious that it would never have been contested if it had not been for the experience of the degeneration of the Russian Revolution. We will look at this later but let us first round off the debate in Russian Social Democracy in 1902-3. If what Lenin's "Economist" opponents were saying had been true (and subsequent anti-partyists still echo then there is no need for a revolutionary party). The class struggle cannot be abolished the reasoning goes. It is inevitable, and so therefore is revolutionary consciousness. Unfortunately this is not true, and the historical experience of the British working class has shown it time after time. The British working class went through a century of the fiercest economic battles in the nineteenth century. It created massive trades unions, defined itself and was aware of itself as a class, yet failed to create for itself a socialist/revolutionary consciousness. Quite the contrary, the advanced sector of the British proletariat, the unionised workers, functioned as a wing of the Liberal bourgeoisie without maintaining its class

independence. Even leading members of the First International who came from this background eventually became Liberal MPs. This is exactly what Lenin argued; not that the "economic" struggle of the class must remain non-political if communists abstain but that its politicisation will take a bourgeois form.

Since there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the course of their movement,³ the only choice is either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course (for mankind has not created a "third" ideology, and, moreover, in a society torn by class antagonisms there can never be a non-class or an above class ideology). Hence to belittle socialist ideology in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree means to strengthen bourgeois ideology.

What is to be Done? Lenin Selected Works Vol. 1 p. 121-2

"Anti-capitalists" of today could reflect on these words. You cannot be anti-capitalist without being communist. Instead of glib talk about "third ways" they should recognise that no such beast exists. Historical experience in Britain though once again confirms the validity of Lenin's argument. In the General Strike in Britain in 1926 the working class under the influence of syndicalists paralysed the bourgeoisie for nine days but these syndicalists had no political programme and assumed that the movement would of itself bring down capitalism. Instead the more bourgeois of the labour leaders went to 10 Downing Street and when Baldwin gave them the alternative of supporting the British state or the British working class they chose the state.

We could also quote the experience of the US working class in the Twentieth century, which has mirrored the experience of the British in the Nineteenth. By raising the level of consciousness of the individual worker, through collective struggle, to that of identification with the rest of the class the economic struggle opens the possibility for the development of revolutionary class consciousness, but only the possibility. Without the intervention of the party, translating the historical programme of the working class into the material struggle of today, the class consciousness of the workers will decline or will even take a reactionary direction (as the bourgeoisie are fond of pointing out).

Indeed class identity alone can be compatible with reactionary ideology. Sometimes the most reactionary workers are amongst the

most conscious of belonging to the working class. In the great strikes in South Africa after World War One the mobilising slogan of the strikers in the Rand Rebellion of 1922 was "Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a White South Africa"!

After *What is to be Done?*

The party as the bearer of the programme of the revolutionary achievements of the working class is at the core of Lenin's arguments. He was fully aware that steps in real movement were worth more than programmes but steps in real movement are often far apart in working class history. In the meantime the carrier of revolutionary class consciousness is the party.

It goes without saying that 'every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programmes,' as Karl Marx said. But neither Marx nor any other theoretician or practical worker in the Social Democratic movement has ever denied the tremendous importance of a Programme for the consolidation and consistent activity of a political party.

Quoted in Paul Le Blanc *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* Humanities Press, 1990. p.161

It is sometimes argued that Lenin revised the ideas of *What is to be Done?* or even rejected them altogether after the first Russian Revolution of 1905. But let us be clear about what Lenin corrected. He never once varied from the idea that the party was the bearer of revolutionary consciousness from the fact that its programme was the distillation of the proletariat's past experiences. Indeed *What is to be Done?* was aimed at a current which was already in decline, "Economism", which had been more influential than the followers of the Social Democratic paper *Iskra* in 1900, was already collapsing by 1902. In a country like Russia where trades unions were illegal every economic strike became almost immediately a political strike. Any organisation which was agnostic on this issue was doomed. What Lenin did want to correct was the bits he had written previously about the nature and structure of the party. Lenin was clear that the German Social Democratic model of an open party was not possible under the autocratic police state of the Tsar. This is why he called at this time for "a party of a new type". A small secret party consisting only of professional revolutionaries (preferably of workers rather than the disorganised Russian intellectual type) had to be taken on who could stay out of the clutches of the police whilst they spread propaganda and agitation. This was

the body which could transform the "sparks of consciousness" generated by the daily fight against capital into a political basis for attacking the state. The Revolution of 1905 changed this. After the Tsar conceded a constitution it was now possible to go for a mass enrolment of workers in the ambiguous conditions of the period when elections to the parliament or Duma before 1914 gave some scope for legal work.

Rosa Luxemburg and the Party

In terms of class consciousness and organisation Rosa Luxemburg is often cited by bourgeois commentators as the antithesis of Lenin, a Marxist who wasn't dictatorial and who was tolerant. Even would-be revolutionaries saturated with years of anti-Leninist propaganda look to her as someone who formulated a critique of Lenin's mechanical tendencies and therefore provides a more dialectical basis to understand the question of class consciousness. For example, Franz Borkenau, an influential ex-communist, wrote a history of the Communist International in which he insisted that

...Lenin, instead of the belief in proletarian revolution, had put his hopes in a centralised group under his leadership, Rosa Luxemburg alone continued to believe in the proletariat.

World Communism Ann Arbor 1962 p. 45

This is a glorious bowdlerisation but one which is frequently believed by those unwilling to find out for themselves. It may come as shock to some of them that far from being a blind worshipper of spontaneity against the party Luxemburg, even in her 1904 critique of Lenin stressed

the need for a proletarian vanguard conscious of its class interests and capable of self-direction in political activity.

Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks (Pathfinder Press 1970) p.119

and far from raising spontaneity above organisation, she insisted that a party was needed which "possesses the gift of political mobility, complemented by unflinching loyalty to principles and concern for unity". (ibid.).

After the Russian Revolution Luxemburg only reinforced this view

Thus it is clear that in every revolution only that party is capable of seizing the leadership and power which has the courage to issue the appropriate slogans

for driving the revolution ahead and the courage to draw all the necessary conclusions from the situation.

The Russian Revolution in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks (Pathfinder Press 1970) p.374

She went on to say that only the Bolsheviks had grasped "the true dialectic of revolutions" and to stand the

wisdom of parliamentary moles on its head: not through a majority to revolutionary tactics, but through revolutionary tactics to a majority – that is the way the road runs.. Only a party which knows how to lead, that is to advance things, wins support in stormy times ... What ever a party could offer of courage, revolutionary far-sightedness and in consistency in a historic hour, Lenin, Trotsky and other comrades have given in good measure.

ibid p.374-5

So what is the difference between Luxemburg and Lenin on class consciousness? To explain this we have to again understand the context in which the two were writing. Whilst Lenin regarded the Economists as the Russian version of Bernstein's revisionism, Luxemburg had come to see that German Social Democracy was suffering from another disease. Whilst Lenin was trying to get rid of amateurism in Russia the "professional revolutionaries" whom Luxemburg met every day in Germany were far from the ideal of Lenin. In fact they were careerists, trades union bureaucrats, the petty clerks of a bureaucratic party machine, reformist parliamentarians. They were the ones who, scared of losing their petty privileges would lead German Social Democracy into collusion with the German military and support the imperialist war of 1914. The centralism of effort which Lenin realised was essential to get all Russia's scattered socialists together was already caricatured by the conduct of many socialists in the German party. Luxemburg poses the central dilemma best in the following passage

On the one hand we have the mass: on the other hand its historic goal, located outside existing society. On the one hand we have the day-to-day struggle; on the other, the social revolution. Such are the terms of the dialectical contradiction through which the socialist movement makes its way. It follows that this movement can best advance by tacking betwixt and between the two dangers by which it is constantly being threatened. One is the loss of its mass character; the other the abandonment of its goal. One is the danger of sinking back to

the condition of a sect, the other the danger of becoming a movement of bourgeois social reform.

Organisational Questions of the Russian Social Democracy in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks (Pathfinder Press 1970) pp. 128-9

Rosa Luxemburg and Social Democracy

Given the stark alternative of 'sectarianism' or 'reformism' that Luxemburg posed it is little wonder that she concluded that Social Democracy was the only class movement.

The fact is that the social democracy is not joined to the organisation of the proletariat. It is itself the proletariat.
op cit. in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* p.119

Little wonder that she found it hard to break from the German Social Democratic Party even after the betrayal of 1914 ("Better the worst working class party than none at all" was her initial reaction). Luxemburg has a tendency here to see Social Democracy as the class movement even when she can see that it is riddled with opportunism. Her faith in the mass strike after 1904 is like an antithesis to the opportunism and capitulationist tendencies of the Social Democratic majority. So when talking about the party Lenin and she are talking about two different beasts. For Lenin, the small revolutionary party fights within the class for a revolutionary consciousness whilst Luxemburg looks to the spontaneous movement of the class to shake Social Democracy from its decline into reformism and opportunism. Thus her conclusion against Lenin,

Historically the errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement are infinitely more fruitful than the infallibility of the cleverest Central Committee.
(ibid p. 130)

was really (like the whole of her pamphlet) aimed at her own party and had little to do with what Lenin was arguing (as he himself noted). It is, in any case nonsense, since it is both a false dichotomy and seems to worship failure against success. Luxemburg had an incredible belief that new struggles in Germany would **of themselves** correct the course of Social Democracy.

If, at any time and under any circumstances Germany were to experience big political struggles, an era of tremendous economic struggle would open up at the same time ... If they stood aside from the movement or opposed it ... the union or party leaders would be swept away by the wave of events

and the economic and political struggles would be fought to a conclusion without them.

Selected Works Volume 1 pp. 235-6

How they would be pushed aside Luxemburg does not say but she does not offer us the logical step of a split in Social Democracy leading to a new party. Luxemburg went further than this in her last speech to the Founding Congress of the Communist Party of Germany. Having finally broken with Social Democracy only a few months earlier Luxemburg again missed the point. Criticising her former colleagues she said;

They think that to educate the proletarian masses in the socialist spirit means the following; to lecture them, distribute leaflets and pamphlets amongst them. But no! The socialist proletarian school does not need all this. Activity itself educates the masses.

This was dangerously wrong. In the first place the Social Democrats had no interest in revolution so any discussion of their methods was now irrelevant and in the second place such stress on activity as the only educator of the working class leads, and in the case of the KPD (German Communist Party) did lead to, voluntarism. Whilst Luxemburg herself condemned Liebknecht's declaration of the Spartakist Revolt of January, 1919 she had partially prepared for "activity" like this in her view of the development of class consciousness.

The Debate on Centralism

One of the main reasons for the differences between Lenin and Luxemburg is that Lenin was one of the first Russian Marxists created by the conditions of class struggle in Russia in the 1890s. Luxemburg came from Poland to join what she considered to be the greatest socialist party in the world. Her misfortune was that she was never so involved in party issues as Lenin. He was actually in at the foundation of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. He had seen what would happen to it if it did not have a clear organisational framework. Hence he emphasises the need for centralism.

Luxemburg, on the other hand was on friendly terms with all the reformists in Social Democracy and frequently expressed herself in private letters to people like Clara Zetkin as quite dismayed at the way the party leaders were going. But instead of developing a public critique against them, as Lenin did against people he respected and even loved (like Vera Zasulich and George Plekhanov), Luxemburg put her faith in the activity of



**Rosa Luxemburg
1871-1919**

the class correcting Kautsky's errors! And in every way her critique of Lenin's *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back* text is really not aimed at the Russian party at all. In fact Lenin complained that Luxemburg "does not acquaint the reader with my book but with something else...". Lenin actually rebuts every charge made by Luxemburg against him but we will give just one example. Luxemburg had accused Lenin of following the neo-Jacobin activist, Auguste Blanqui in thinking that a small elite (in this case the Party Central Committee) could make the revolution. Lenin was forced to reply;

Actually this is not so. I have never advocated any such view ... Our controversy has principally been over whether the Central Committee and Central Organ should represent the trend of the majority of the Party Congress, or whether they should not. About this "ultracentralist" and "purely Blanquist" demand the comrade says not a word, she prefers to declaim against the mechanical subordination of the part to the whole, against slavish submission, blind obedience and other such bogeys. I am very grateful to Comrade Luxemburg for explaining the profound idea that slavish submission is very harmful to the Party, but I should like to know: does the comrade consider it normal for supposed party central institutions to be dominated by the minority of the Party Congress?

Lenin *Collected Works* Volume 7 pp. 473-4

The Mass Strike

This leads us logically to *The Mass Strike*. Rosa Luxemburg actually wrote this when she was in Finland staying with Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders in 1906. She had recently been released from a Polish prison after three months imprisonment, having been arrested for entering Poland illegally in order to take part in the 1905 Revolution which

was then in action throughout the Russian Empire. As a leader of the Socialist Party of the Kingdom of Poland and Lithuania she took part in the discussions which then led to its unification with the Bolsheviks at this time. This alone should convince anyone that whatever the political differences she had with the Bolsheviks she shared their revolutionary conceptions.

It was to promote her idea of revolution that she wrote *The Mass Strike*. Her target, as always, was the German Social Democratic Party, particularly the trades union leaders. Luxemburg had been trying to get the German Party to adopt a resolution in favour of the mass strike before her imprisonment. At the Jena Conference of the Party in 1906 however the best that could be agreed was that the Socialists would call a mass strike in the event of the curtailing of voting by the Kaiser. Even this was too much for the trades' union leaders, who, for the first time, openly went against Social Democratic policies. Luxemburg's pamphlet was aimed at convincing the party to overturn the decisions of these trades' union leaders.

Once again Luxemburg's revolutionary intent was not matched by revolutionary arguments. In the first place she misjudges the nature of trades unions by insisting that they "are fighting organisations of the proletariat" (*Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* p.196). In the early days of unions when there were no permanent officials this may have been partially true. However unions have never been anything other than defensive organisations of the class. They were certainly not the bodies which would lead the assault on capital and by 1904 the bureaucratised unions of German Social Democracy were four square against any proletarian revolution. From here comes a second error where she argues that in the mass strike the economic and the political are of equal importance.

In a word, the economic struggle is the factor that advances the movement from one political focal point to another. The political struggle periodically fertilises the ground for the economic struggle. Cause and effect exchange each second. Thus we find the two elements, the economic and political, do not incline to separate themselves ... during the mass strike in Russia, not to speak of negating each other as pedantic schemes would suggest.

The Mass Strike in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks p.208

But as with so many of her arguments the elegance of the prose masks the weakness of



In the body of the 'soviet' the Russian workers made the historical discovery of how mass society could be run by the workers themselves.

the argument. It is quite true that economic struggles of the class, or more precisely the mass moments of such struggles, raise political demands which show that the class defines itself, creates its class identity, and advances its interests, both political and economic in struggle. But the consciousness which emerges from those struggles is based on the political advances made by the proletariat and formulated by their class political organs. Sometimes the class is ahead of the party here, as in 1905 in Russia where the Menshevik attempt to find a way of unifying strikes and strike committee, led to the formation of the Petrograd Soviet. This arose spontaneously out of the struggle in 1905 but its successful reestablishment as an organ of workers' power 12 years later was because the Russian Social Democrats had learned from that experience, and recognised the value of that organ, for establishing workers' autonomy. Luxemburg, in fact fetishises the **forms** of struggle which she thinks will automatically lead to the formation of class consciousness. In this she sometimes sounds religious

The most precious thing, because it is the most enduring in the sharp ebb and flow of the revolutionary wave is the proletariat's spiritual growth. The advance by leaps and bounds of the proletariat affords an inviolable guarantee of its further progress in the inevitable political and economic struggles ahead.

But this is a myth. Once the period of open class struggle is over the consciousness of the proletariat retreats, the class is once again atomised and divided. The workers who created the soviets in 1905 marched off to war in 1914 and when they re-created the Soviets in 1917 they still did not have an authentically proletarian content to start with (given that they voted to support the

Provisional Government). It was only with the Bolsheviks' injection of class politics into the soviets based on the lessons of 1905 that the problem was overcome. Luxemburg in *The Mass Strike* consistently fails to analyse the **content** of the struggle and this in the end appears to leave her as a worshipper of spontaneity. Or at least it would do if she did not also write such passages as the following

*The social democrats are the most enlightened, most class conscious vanguard of the whole proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in fatalist fashion, with folded arms for the advent of the "revolutionary situation"; to wait for that which in every spontaneous movement falls from the clouds. On the contrary they must now, as always, hasten the development of things and endeavour to accelerate events. This they cannot do however, by suddenly issuing the "slogan" for a mass strike at random at any odd moment, but first and foremost, by making clear to the proletariat the **inevitable advent** of this revolutionary period ...*

The Mass Strike in Rosa Luxemburg Speaks p. 200

However this is what Luxemburg inside Social Democracy failed to do and her tragedy is that she did not break with social democracy sooner. Naturally however we are looking back with the benefit of hindsight. Whilst the betrayal of 1914 sticks in our brains, and now seems inevitable, it was a blow which shocked both Lenin and Luxemburg. There was no single event before 1914 which made it easy to split with the movement (even if small groups like the Lichtstrahlen and the International Socialists already had done) as we noted she considered it to be not just the organisation of the workers but the working class itself.

Belief in spontaneity alone as the regenerator of the party was at times Luxemburg's only consolation. The best we can do is to learn from that experience. Luxemburg contemplated suicide when she heard that the SPD's Parliamentary fraction had voted war credits for the Kaiser. She was arrested for opposing the war, as was Karl Liebknecht, the first MP to vote against war credits (the second was Otto Ruhle). In clandestine conditions they formed the Spartakus League. But typically even this was part of the USPD, the pacifist socialists led by Kautsky and Bernstein! Thus even during the imperialist war Luxemburg did not plant a banner around which revolutionaries could unambiguously rally.

After the November Revolution the SPD held

the majority in the soviets and few workers had heard of the Spartakists. The formation of the German Communist Party took place over New Year 1919. By the end of that January both Luxemburg and Liebknecht had died at the hands of the SPD's hired thugs. This tragedy only underlines the need to establish a revolutionary party well in advance of the spontaneous outbreak of the class. This also makes for a conclusion to the theoretical differences between Luxemburg and Lenin, differences which, as we have shown are more to do with their real experiences than with any difference in revolutionary temperament. Whilst Luxemburg thought the party was the class and that the spontaneous movement would make the party revolutionary, Lenin fully understood that only a minority would be communist in advance of the revolution. It was necessary for this minority to fight within the spontaneous upsurge for it to become a communist revolution. Once begun that revolution would alter the working class on a mass scale and make it ready, as "an immense majority", "to found society anew"[Marx]. In our next chapter we will look at the impact of the Russian Revolution of 1917 on the issue of class consciousness and revolutionary organisation.

6

Spontaneity and Organisation in the Russian Revolution of February 1917

We have arrived at the point where all previous ideas about what was and was not “revolutionary class consciousness” reach their greatest test. Here we should perhaps begin with a warning on methodology. We don’t look at the experience of the Russian Revolution as something to be learned by rote so we can mechanically repeat it in the future. The history of all previous class struggles tells us that no two events ever follow the same trajectory for the very obvious reason that they take place in different historical circumstances. Equally, the contending classes have before them the experience of that previous struggle, and alter their actions accordingly. In this respect we can be certain of only one thing – the next proletarian revolution will be very different in its origins and development from the Russian revolution a century or so ago.

This does not mean there is nothing to understand from that experience in terms of the development of class consciousness and class political organisation. Just as the Russian working class of 1917 had before it the experiences of the Paris Commune of 1871 and the first Russian Revolution of 1905, we have the experience of 1917 as part of our historic legacy. The key issue is to understand what that legacy actually means for us today. The big questions revolve around how the working class moved from accepting the existing order to a full-scale overthrow of the political system as well as three governments in the course of ten months. What role did the previously politically aware workers play in the course of that development of a mass class consciousness? How did the working class establish class-wide organisations which were at total odds with the old ruling class state? But first we will deal with the question of the bourgeoisie’s denial that there was any development of a revolutionary class consciousness at all.

A Bourgeois Tragedy

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991 you would expect that the bourgeois ideological offensive against the revolution of 1917 would have eased up. Not a bit. In fact the reverse was the case. No sooner was the military threat of the Soviet Union consigned to the dustbin of history than a whole new series of revisionist histories by bourgeois writers of all backgrounds were trying to deny any working class character to the events of 1917. All were intent on denying the real proletarian character of the October Revolution. Doyen of them all was the ex-KGB general Dmitri Volkogonov (now deceased) who published two works which claimed to have racy new revelations about how the

Russia of Lenin consciously paved the way for the Russia of Stalin. However a reading of the text shows that all this is publisher’s froth. The archives have revealed little to alter what we know (at least so far). All Volkogonov did was to give an interpretation that would sell books to Western readers (no point writing for a Russian readership since, apart from the new emerging revolutionary minorities, the whole issue is a yawn for them today). Volkogonov and his ilk have had an enormous influence on recent academic writing on the Russian Revolution in the West. You can see this by comparing the works of Neil Harding and Robert Service both before and after the fall of the Soviet Union. Both have written extensively (two volumes in Harding’s case and three in Service’s case) about Lenin’s role in the Revolution. These are serious works widely researched and meticulously evidenced. However in the 1990s both have written smaller books to make sure that we know that they totally disapprove of Lenin.¹

But not content with denying that the October Revolution was anything other than a coup, our bourgeois historians have now expanded into denigrating the very appearance of soviets in the February Revolution. This is the aim of Orlando Figes who, in attempting to imitate the gossipy style of Simon Schama in his book on the French Revolution only gives us a good insight into what bourgeois consciousness is. What links the two books is their anti-marxism. The French Revolution, was “good” because it made us all “Citizens” (the title of Schama’s work) but the Russian Revolution was “*A People’s Tragedy*” because it wanted to make us all “comrades”. For these public schoolboy scribblers there can be no higher human progress beyond the current capitalist society. For them “freedom” means continuing to enjoy the comfortable life of the Cambridge college preserving its exclusiveness from the untutored masses.

So bourgeois revisionism has only heaped more on its own mountain of distortions since 1990. The fact is that the bourgeois version of the Russian Revolution insists that there was no revolutionary or class consciousness amongst the Russian working class, but that the weaknesses of both the Russian liberal bourgeoisie and the existing power structures in Russia (which had not established a solid Westminster-style Parliament) had allowed any old band of ruthless adventurers like the Bolsheviks to turn up and pick up the power which lay abandoned in the streets. This is a very ruling class conception. If our masters don’t control power then it must be an orphan. Or as Trotsky put it

*Those who lose by a revolution are rarely inclined to call it by its real name.*²

The fact that the “spontaneous” uprising of the Russian working class in February 1917 had very sound material reasons seems only peripheral to their analysis.

February 1917: Beyond Spontaneity

Here we use the term “spontaneous” carefully. The Tsarina Alexandra wrote to her husband that this was a “hooligan movement” which would die down if only “the Duma would behave itself!” But the movement was anything but hooligan. Even if no organisation planned the revolution it had clear goals which developed from demands for bread into a call for the overthrow of the monarchy and an end to the war. Spontaneous in this sense does not mean disorganised but means that it has no single organisational centre. Lenin was quite happy (in his famous January 1917 lecture to Swiss socialist youth) to state that the 1905 revolution was “spontaneous” but as Trotsky noted in his wide-ranging analysis, *The History of the Russian Revolution*,

The mystic doctrine of spontaneousness explains nothing. In order correctly to appraise the situation and determine the moment for a blow at the enemy, it was necessary that the masses or their guiding layers should make their examination of historical events and have their criteria for estimating them. In other words it was necessary that there should not be masses in the abstract but masses of Petrograd workers, and Russian workers in general, who had passed through the Revolution of 1905...
op.cit. p.169

What Trotsky correctly emphasises is that the “dress rehearsal” of 1905 is absolutely central to the formation of working class consciousness in February 1917. It explains why the actions of the masses in 1917 were so collectively coherent (and, as Lenin noted, went well beyond the hesitant attitudes of the political parties). In a general sense the revolution is only spontaneous in that;

the history of a revolution is first of all a history of the forcible entrance of the masses into the realm of rulership over their own destiny.

This revolution however starts off from relatively limited perspectives. It only moves forward because a new situation has arisen.

...society does not change its institutions as need arises, the way a mechanic changes his instruments. On the contrary, society actually takes the institutions which hang upon it as a given once and for all. For decades the oppositional criticism is nothing more than a safety valve for mass dissatisfaction, a condition of the stability of the social structure. Such, in principle, for example was the significance acquired by the social-democratic criticism. Entirely exceptional conditions, independent of the will of persons or parties are necessary in order to tear off from discontent the fetters of conservatism and bring the masses to insurrection.

op.cit. pp.17-18

In other words, changing circumstances create changed human beings. Here Trotsky is demonstrating his grasp of Marxism. It echoes, in a real historical context, what Marx wrote in *The German Ideology* that “the alteration of human beings on a mass scale ... can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution...”³. The “entirely exceptional conditions” he speaks of link the Bolshevik party and the revolutionary working class in 1917.

In the long term the Bolsheviks had held the view after 1906 that whatever the nature of the coming revolution the working class would have to fight for “a revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry” from the start. They were not hamstrung by the mechanistic theory of the Mensheviks that the proletariat would have to lend its support to the bourgeoisie to establish a democracy. This meant that the actions of individual Bolsheviks inside the class were always towards pushing forward the struggle of the working class as an independent class.

Mensheviks, on the other hand, tended to look to their leaders to see what compromises they were making with the “democratic” parties. This comes over in the “personal record” of Sukhanov. Although an Internationalist Menshevik (i.e. a supporter of Martov on the “left” of the Party) he records that he found the Bolsheviks in St Petersburg in the February Revolution rather dreary and “narrow”. He arrives at this verdict because they were not willing to go to Gorky’s house to coordinate with the other intellectual Social Democrats and “progressive” bourgeois politicians. Sukhanov complains that they did not understand “the bigger picture”. All they did was look around for printing presses to get out propaganda to the workers. This is significant because it tells us how the Bolsheviks were already embryonically the

party of the class. Although they were not yet that party they had also laid down the ground work in the shorter term.

The key issue here was the war. No other party in the world had come out so clearly against the war as the Bolsheviks. It is their greatest claim to revolutionary leadership in their entire history. Trotsky (who was not then a Bolshevik) points out that on the eve of the First World War Bolshevik influence amongst the working class was at its height. Indeed strike figures for 1913-14 show that Tsarism was facing a wave of strikes like that which preceded the 1905 revolution.⁴ The Bolsheviks had been growing in influence. Once war was declared the St Petersburg Committee of the Party issued a leaflet against it. It read

*Comrades, the government and bourgeoisie have sown the wind; they will reap the whirlwind! Nicholas the Bloody ... will be the last Russian Tsar... Revolution is coming. Lets do all we can to make it victorious.*⁵

This brought to the factories of St Petersburg the message that Lenin was already fighting for on the international stage, of turning “the imperialist war into a civil war”. Of course this was not a way to instant popularity but it did lay down a class position, a banner which would later become a rallying point for the working class. Once war was declared a wave of patriotic fervour had engulfed Russia, like all the other belligerent states. The Bolsheviks declined numerically as the more conservative elements in the working class began to dominate (not least because the war gave the excuse for mass arrests of worker activists).⁶ However this was a situation which only lasted until the end of 1915. As the Russian war effort ground to a halt and as the economic impact of the war led to appalling shortages, the discontent of the masses rose and the Bolsheviks, persecuted, (their most experienced leaders in exile in Siberia or abroad, and short of resources), were still able to exert a political influence beyond their real organisational strength. This was because they had taken a coherent programmatic stand against the war. Thus when Trotsky answers his own question “Who led the February Revolution?” his lapidary statement,

Conscious and tempered workers educated for the most part by the party of Lenin.

doesn’t appear quite so metaphysical. He cites various examples of unsung Bolshevik members like the soldier Muralov or the worker Kaiurov who carry out decisive actions at the level of the street in the early

days of the February Revolution. Nor do we need to take only Trotsky's word. Orlando Figes, no friend of the proletariat, even concedes that "socialist agitation amongst the working class" was significant in the early hours of the February Revolution in getting striking workers out onto the street. This had begun on International Women's Day (February 23rd according to the old calendar) when the annual demonstration was transformed by women strikers marching from the working class Vyborg quarter to the bourgeois Nevsky Prospekt to add their protest against the bread shortages. On this day the bread ration had been cut for the third time so the shouts for "khleba" (bread) were accompanied with the first cries of "Doloi tsarskoi monarkhii" (Down with Tsarism). Working class agitation continued on February 24th 1917 when hundreds of thousands joined the strikes.

*Workers held factory meetings throughout the city and urged on by socialist agitators, resolved to march against the centre. Many armed themselves with knives, spanner, hammers...*⁷

This is also significant because for all the streetfighting and fraternisation with troops that was to take place over the next five days, what gave it substance was the collective consciousness which had brought at least half (one police report gave 90%) of the St Petersburg working class on strike. It gave life to what Lenin had written after the Moscow Uprising of December 1905 that

*... unless the revolution assumes a mass character and affects the troops, there can be no question of a serious struggle.*⁸

Once on strike they met every day at the factory and in these mass assemblies decided to go down to the city centre to demonstrate. No wonder the Tsar's State Council ordered the factories to be locked to deny the workers this collective meeting place. It was also noted by eyewitnesses of all shades of opinion that, whereas the early demonstrations had been "good-humoured", and accompanied by people "dressed respectably", this gradually changed on the afternoon of the 23rd as the mass movement became more proletarian in character. However, even now, when some Bolsheviks tried to unfurl a banner inscribed with the words "Doloi voiny" (Down with the War) they were set upon and the banner disappeared. Two days later the crowds, faced by armed troops, were chanting the very same slogan in Znamenskaia Square. It wasn't just desperation then that had transformed the consciousness of the working class but

also a sense that the war had created a new situation different from 1905.

In 1905 the Army was still largely the professional Army of the Tsar. The sense of futility of the war had not been so deep in 1905 either. Now (and various eyewitnesses testify to this), as the demonstrators realised that the largely peasant conscript reservists, which made up the bulk of the Petrograd garrison, were unlikely to shoot, they grew more confident. The final key to it was the Cossacks, who had never hesitated in the past to gun down any anti-tsarist demonstrators, but the workers were already attempting to fraternise with them on the very first day of the uprising. Emboldened individuals, often women but also men would go up to soldiers, seize the barrel of their gun and beg them to turn it the other way. There is no record of any of these appeals failing.⁹ Once the Cossacks made it clear that they were only standing in line and not really attacking the demonstrators the regime's last bastion was the police. Although some soldiers in some regiments had shot down strikers early in the revolution, it was the fighting between the police and the other soldiers that led to most of the casualties. Once the Cossacks (at the request of the Bolshevik worker Katyurov) killed Constable Krylov, a top police officer in the act of ordering his forces to shoot on a crowd in Znamenskaia Square¹⁰ the last hesitation of the mass movement ended. The revolution was in full swing. Although some regiments were still slow to come over to the workers, and there were exchanges of gunfire within and between regiments, the numbers on the streets increased. Red flags began to appear everywhere. What for years had been mere ideas put forward by revolutionary minorities were now taking on a practical dimension.

Nowhere was this clearer than the question of what was to replace Tsarism. The bourgeoisie had watched with horror as the working class and the peasant army reservists had wiped away centuries of autocracy whilst they themselves had done nothing. However the more energetic amongst them (especially those in labour organisations like Kerensky) realised some response was needed if the "underclass" were to be prevented from taking over. This is the key point in any revolution. Workers can do the fighting and the dying on the streets but unless they know what they want they are likely to be stitched up by one or other capitalist faction. This was clearly illustrated in more recent times in Poland when the shipyard workers of Gdansk started the movement to overthrow the Stalinist apparatus in Poland. Lacking an independent class perspective of their own



The Petrograd Soviet meeting in the Smolny Institute in 1917.

(since they were workers overthrowing a supposed "workers' state") they succumbed to the leadership of reactionary Catholicism in the shape of Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement, itself maintained by CIA finance. This illustrates the limits of a movement which can, with practical steps, demolish a hated regime but which without its own programmatic perspective cannot create a new society. This programmatic perspective has to be posed in advance within the working class by those workers who understand that a change of leadership is not enough to make a revolution. In Russia, the Social Democratic movement had been doing this, making this vital contribution to the February Revolution.

But once the Tsar has gone the acid test would be in the nature of what followed. It was a testimony to the strength of the class movement in Petrograd that the bourgeoisie did not get things all their own way. When Kerensky and his pals in the Socialist Revolutionary Party were prepared to sit with conservative Duma members like Shingarev and Milyukov to create a Provisional Government, the workers and soldiers who had done the fighting also demanded their own organisations. As Trotsky said, this was not just any old proletariat. This was the same Russian proletariat who had recently experienced the 1905 Revolution. In some respects, they did not need to wait for their political minorities to remind them of 1905, as it was still relatively fresh in their collective consciousness. That is why when the Bolsheviks put out a leaflet on February 27th calling for elections to the Soviets they were already echoing calls by cooperative organisations, and newly-formed factory organisations, for Soviet power.

Soviets without Communism

The actual decision to revive the 1905 Soviet seems to have arisen when the crowds on

the Vyborg side (the working class district around the Finland Station) decided to free the prisoners in the Kresty (Crosses) Prison. Amongst these was the Menshevik first President of the 1905 Soviet, Khrustalev-Nosar. The Mensheviks led the way in forming the new Soviet and linked it with the Tsarist War Industries Committees which were led by Gvozdev, another Menshevik (as they were designed to improve war production the Bolsheviks had led a successful boycott campaign against them).

At this point many histories make the point that the Bolsheviks had seemingly played little overt part in the Revolution. There were several reasons for this. Like all other parties they had not expected the revolution and were even cautioning women strikers not to get isolated on February 24th. The first Bolshevik leaflet calling for a general strike only hit the streets on the 26th (by which time hundreds of thousands were already out!). The Bolshevik leadership in St Petersburg was undoubtedly weak (the St Petersburg Committee was so decimated by arrests that the Vyborg committee was given its role). However the Bolsheviks were not idle. As we have seen, individual Bolsheviks were with the workers on the streets and often took the initiative in giving an informal lead when it was required. The Bolsheviks did not go to the Tauride Palace to be present at the setting up of the Provisional Government and the Soviet because they regarded this as all in the realm of the bourgeoisie and were thus caught out by the re-establishment of the Petrograd Soviet).

Figs scoffs at the revival of the Soviet pointing out accurately enough that its original executive was made up of intellectuals who represented the political parties (even the Bolsheviks were allocated two seats on it). What he does not explain (because it undermines his basic argument that this was an illegitimate power) is that this was only the beginning of the process. Very soon every regiment would be electing its own delegates. These delegates were not the articulate intellectuals who formed the provisional executive but people whose voice had rarely ever been heard in history. Sukhanov gives a vivid picture of their "artless"¹¹ entry onto the stage of history.

We had a meeting.. We have been told to say ... The officers hid... To join the Soviet of Workers' Deputies... They told us to say that we refuse to serve against the people any more, we're going to join with our brother-workers, all united to defend the people's cause... We would lay down our lives for that ... Our general meeting told us to greet

you ... Long live the revolution!...

It was there and then proposed, and approved with storms of applause – to fuse together the revolutionary army and the proletariat of the capital and create a united organisation to be called from then on the "Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies..."

Many factories already had elected delegates to the Soviet. At the same time, unlike in 1905, the soviet movement spread rapidly to the provinces.¹² Within a fortnight there were 77 other soviets in cities and towns around Russia. There is much to comment on here. In the first place the soviet or workers' council represents the historically discovered form of the proletarian transformation of society. If proletarian revolution can only be carried out "by the immense majority" it has to have a totally different form of organisation to bourgeois society. In bourgeois society parliamentarism represents the class form of their rule. It creates the illusion of mass rule, of democracy, but in actual fact depends on the passivity of the citizens. They get to vote once every four or five years for representatives who then have the total freedom to do as they like with their so-called "democratic mandate". The citizens cannot object, and indeed any strike or other form of direct action to object to a policy comes up against the argument that the democratically elected representatives have the only legitimate authority.

Note the difference with the soviet. The soldiers' delegates repeatedly state "we have been told to say" or "our general meeting stated". These are delegates. They have a direct mandate. They don't vote how they like but how they were told to vote by their workers' or regimental assembly. If they don't they can be instantly recalled and replaced. Bourgeois theorists constantly tell us that this sort of direct democracy is impractical but the whole experience of 1917 demonstrates the opposite. This democracy is not subject to bribery of individuals and controlled only by the electors – but then that's why the bourgeoisie hate it and why they get their hack writers to denigrate it. Up until now there has been nothing more effective in allowing the mass of the population to directly participate in "government" than the soviet movement.

What does this tell us about class consciousness and political organisation? First, that in a practical movement like a revolution, the working class will re-create (even in slightly amended form) organs that they have already experimented with in the past. Second, that even the best proletarian

party can be left behind by events. Lenin had no qualms about telling the world that the working class as a whole were infinitely more revolutionary than any political party (including the Bolsheviks). However this is not the end of the story. The real issue is how does that party respond to the new situation.

All the evidence is that the working class members of the Bolshevik party acquitted themselves well in the turmoil of February. Less impressive were the so-called leaders. If Shlyapnikov and company vacillated in late February they at least stuck to the revolutionary defeatist policy which characterised the Bolsheviks throughout the war. But when they were replaced by "Old" Bolsheviks like Stalin, Muranov and Kamenev, newly released from Siberian exile, the picture became blurred.

The new threesome took over Pravda and began writing about the need to support the Provisional Government. Kamenev even wrote that the war must go on until the Germans had been pushed out of Russia. Lenin's irritation and anger about this is well-known. Less well-known is the perplexed reaction of the rank and file who had defended the revolutionary defeatist position throughout the war. Whilst Lenin's *April Theses* were a bombshell to some of the Bolshevik leadership, they were welcomed as a restatement of Bolshevik clarity in the factories. All the indications are that this confusion was too short to be critical but it also illustrates that the Bolshevik Party was not the rigidly disciplined organisation which Stalinist legend has made it out to be.

What we have tried to show here is that its strengths were that it had a clear revolutionary political orientation and that it was a distinct part of working class life in advance of the revolution. These were to be critical factors in the development of a revolutionary party in 1917. And this forms the next focus of our study. It is one thing for the working class to create class wide organs which actually carry out the transformation of society but these organs cannot do this as long as they are dominated by political programmes which call for class collaboration with the dominant class.

Soviets with Communists?

From the beginning of May the distinction between the Bolsheviks and the other political parties became sharper. This was critical to the future development of the revolution. It is one thing for the working class to overthrow a regime, even to establish class wide organisations, but it is another

to make these organs of revolutionary transformation.

As we saw in the last part of this text, the soviets in the German revolution were always dominated by the Social Democrats who simply got them to vote for the bourgeois option of a parliamentary regime. In Russia history took a different course largely (as we argued in the previous issue) because there was a preparation of the working class for the next and decisive step. The Bolshevik refusal to accept the compromise of Dual Power, their refusal to accept that the Revolution was now over as a parliamentary regime had been established, meant that they set out an alternative for the working class. As the material situation shifted, as the hopes for a "democratic peace" faded, the Bolsheviks were the only party who constantly called for "All Power to the Soviets".

In 1917 the class struggle did not reach a peak in February – in February it had barely started. Once the Tsar was out of the way, the bourgeois Provisional Government was face to face with Workers' and Soldiers' Soviets. The only party which was not compromised by being represented in the Provisional Government as well as in the Soviets was the Bolsheviks. The Soviets under Menshevik and SR leadership straddled the two and these parties got the Soviet to agree to support the Provisional Government. In practice the workers and soldiers were supporting decrees of the Soviet which undermined bourgeois rule (such as the orders on military discipline where officers were no longer allowed to address soldiers as "ty" a disrespectful form of "you", or more seriously, officers had to listen to elected committees). Dual Power then was always an uneasy compromise. Real power always lay with the Soviet but the Soviet did not use it. However once it was clear that the Kadet Foreign Minister (and strong man of the bourgeois regime) Milyukov wanted to follow the Tsar's policy of annexation of territory the Soviet demanded his resignation. This was followed by the disastrous June Offensive which confirmed that a war to victory was a distant chimera. This was the pivotal point at which the 1917 Revolution turned. The Bolsheviks' continued principled opposition to the war was now to make its programme, which had itself evolved during the course of the war and the crisis of 1917, into the only alternative for the Russian working class. The relationship between party and class in the later part of 1917 is what we will turn to in the next chapter.

Notes

1 Harding's *Lenin's Political Thought* was reviewed in *Revolutionary Perspectives* 23, Second Series. His later work *Leninism* was reviewed in RP4 (this series). Service wrote *Lenin: A Political Life* [3 Vols, 1985-95] and then *Lenin: A Biography* in 2000. The former is hardly sympathetic to Lenin but the latter introduces us to his subject by listing the evils of Stalinism, but does not mention Stalin once, and claims the whole history of the USSR is Lenin's legacy!

2 *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto Press [1977] p.155.

3 For the full discussion on this see Chapter 2.

4 See S.A. Smith *Red Petrograd* (Cambridge 1990).

5 Quoted in E.N.Burdzhalov *Russia's Second Revolution*, Indiana University Press, [1987] p. 15.

6 *The History of the Russian Revolution*, Pluto Press [1977] p.165.

7 *A People's Tragedy* (Pimlico 1997) p.308.

8 *Lessons of the Moscow Uprising* in V.I.Lenin *Selected Works* Vol 1[Moscow 1977] p.530

9 E.N.Burdzhalov *Russia's Second Revolution*, Indiana University Press, [1987] p. 131.

10 See *Black Night, White Snow*, Harrison Salisbury, Cassell, [1977] p.343.

11 N.N. Sukhanov (Himmer) *The Russian Revolution 1917: A Personal Record*, Princeton, [1984] The description and quotation which follows are from p.61

12 Before anyone objects that the first actual soviet in 1905 was in the textile town of Ivanovo-Vosnessensk. We mean here that the soviet movement was confined to 4 or 5 places in 1905. In 1917 it began to spread from the very beginning.

7

Party and Class in the Revolutionary Wave of 1917-21

The experience of the Russian Revolution is the single most important event in any discussion of the nature of working class consciousness, the emergence of a proletarian party and the nature of class decision-making. In the last part we showed how the Bolsheviks had emerged as a class party in 1917. In this part we wish to begin confronting the issue which has hung around the neck of the revolutionary proletariat since the early 1920's. How is it that a revolution which began with such promise of liberation for the proletariat and therefore for the whole of humanity ended in the mire of one of the worst tyrannies in world history? This is significant because there has been a long tradition of rejecting the role of the party which has made many would be revolutionaries (for example, in the current "anti-capitalist" movement) fear any form of organisation. Given what we have already argued on this question earlier in this series such a fear represents a real danger for the working class. If we cannot overcome it our capacity to act together as a class will not just be severely impeded but the prospect of revolution will vanish. The roots of this anti-organisational tendency lie in the reaction to the Russian Revolution, particularly in the writings of the so-called "councilists" who are still influential amongst today's anti-capitalists.

Councilism and Revolution

Anton Pannekoek, the Dutch communist once wrote that the working class only has two weapons, its organisation and its consciousness. However, Pannekoek, founder member of the German Communist Workers' Party (KAPD), and later prophet of council communism, gave different answers at different times as to the precise relationship between these two factors. As a member of the KAPD he put the original emphasis on the fact that the proletarian party, as the organisation of the most class conscious workers, had to have a programme which was "hard as steel, clear as glass" in order to carry out its historic tasks. This was what Pannekoek at that time realised was the real legacy of the Bolshevik Party in 1917. He correctly contrasted this with the opportunism and betrayal of the parties of the Third International (including the Bolsheviks) which by 1921 were retreating back to making alliances with the same Social Democrats who had betrayed the workers in supporting imperialist war in 1914, and then became organisations dedicated to the preservation of the capitalist system after the First World War.

In Germany this betrayal was clearer than



Anton Pannekoek
1873-1960

anywhere else since after 1919 a river of blood (that included the cold blooded murder of hundreds of communist workers as well as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht) separated the revolutionary proletariat from Social Democracy. This made it all the more detestable that the German Communist Party under Paul Levi not only expelled those who were to become the KAPD, for their opposition to the tactical use of parliamentarism and trades unionism, but was also to go along with the Comintern's policy (when faced with a declining revolutionary situation) of forming united fronts with the Social Democrats who, in secret alliance with the Kaiser's former generals, were now the backbone of the new bourgeois Weimar Republic.

For some of Pannekoek's comrades in the Berlin section of the KAPD a renewed, German, form of Bolshevism was not the solution. Led by Otto Rühle (who had the distinction of being the first Social Democrat M.P. to vote against war credits after Karl Liebknecht) they now began to condemn the party form itself as being a bourgeois creation and thus alien to the process of proletarian emancipation. The Berlin Tendency had some immediate experience to back up Rühle's claim. Not only had Rühle been initially forced to obey the Social Democratic parliamentary party discipline and vote for the Kaiser's war in August 1914, but he had also seen how the once impeccably revolutionary Bolshevik Party, the only significant party to fight against the war, had degenerated under the extremely arduous pressure of a so-called "civil war" which was in fact an international war fought on Russian soil. The consequences of this civil war were materially disastrous for the Russian revolutionary proletariat. Not only were more than 2 million wiped out but the mobilisation of the most class



Class consciousness organised. Russian conscripts carry a banner for 'KOMMUNISM' in 1917.

conscious workers into a new Red Army undermined the operation of the Soviet system. The Soviets were in decline by 1919 and even though Soviet Congresses were still convened by 1920 these were empty shells rather than the vibrant bodies they had once been.

Rühle however avoided any material analysis of this decline. For Rühle the problem was that the Bolsheviks had failed ideologically to carry out the communist programme. He was the among the first to point out that what had been created in Russia was not a communist society but a state capitalist one. This however does him no credit. Lenin himself said that the Soviet Republic was a mixed economy (and the state capitalist parts were for him amongst its better achievements). However no-one was really talking at this point of a socialist society since the young Soviet Republic was still living in the hand-to-mouth existence of the realm of necessity. If economically the proletariat had inherited a situation in late 1917 akin to the economic collapse of the Black Death in the 14th Century (the description is by Edward Acton, Professor of History at East Anglia University in his book "Rethinking the Russian Revolution"), imagine the situation after three more years and 8 million more deaths due to this war foisted on the proletariat by the intervention of international imperialism.

Only a world-wide shift in the balance of class power could have posed the question of socialism but Rühle, after years in the ranks of Social Democracy, saw revolution only in idealist terms. The hesitations of the Bolshevik Party and the Communist International were not, according to him, due to adverse historical circumstances but to the inherent conservatism of all ex-social democratic parties. It was a short step from

here to the conclusion that all parties are bourgeois. What mattered was no longer the organisation which encapsulated the consciousness of those who had always been communist but only the class-wide bodies which gave voice to the whole class. This was the origin of the theory of councilism, of which Rühle has a strong claim to be the father.

Councilism and Marxism

But councilism is predicated on a rejection of the very principles of how class consciousness arises as laid out by Marx in *The German Ideology*. If class consciousness uniformly arises inside the working class then the question of party versus soviet becomes fairly academic, and the party would be irrelevant, but in fact this is not the case.

Class consciousness exists in fragmented form amongst different groups of workers according to relatively recent class experience. Such experiences may be fleeting (a strike in one industry), they may be spaced out over years so that workers only have dim recollections of what has happened previously or they may be particularly violent outbursts of struggle which no-one forgets but which separate groups experience differently. What draws these episodes together is not the direct experience of the actual struggle (the spontaneist/ councilist hypothesis) but the reflection of those workers and activists who recognise that this or that struggle is only a part of a greater whole and is the product of the class antagonisms of capitalist society as a whole. Outside of the immediate struggle how can these groups of workers develop their experience and the consciousness which has been aroused by that experience. A permanent political organisation that takes the acquisitions of the past into the future struggles is not simply desirable - its appearance as part of the process of ever widening class consciousness is inevitable. This is the organisation that we call the party.

Rühle rejected this. Ultimately he argued that only economic organisations of the class were necessary (although he was opposed to all trades unions his view was finally a sort of anarcho-syndicalist idea. Like other members of the German Left who went on to become councilists he never saw the contradiction in this view). For Rühle the very idea of "party" was a bourgeois construct. What he did not see was that the bourgeois party (with its machinery designed to win votes) was a totally different beast from the party of the proletariat. Whilst the former

was solely an instrument for representing economic interests within the system the proletarian party only came into existence as the bearer of the historic programme for the emancipation of the class. This means that not only was it a different type of body altogether it also had a fundamentally different relationship to the majority of its class.

The bourgeois party demanded that voters vote for it in order to leave it to rule but the proletarian party is a guide, a leadership to direct mass proletarian action towards the overthrow of the old order. Whilst the party has an important guiding role in the actual process of insurrection, and will have to lead in that insurrection, in the last resort it has to be this mass of the class not the party which finally overthrows the old order by drawing an even greater mass into the process which begins to build a new one. The precise relationship between class party and mass of the class cannot be decided in advance since it is only in the process of revolution that the working class shakes off "the muck of ages" (Marx, *The German Ideology*) but historical logic cannot be turned on its head. First class consciousness takes a minority form and then this minority points the way forward to the whole class in a revolutionary situation. Only once the capitalist order has been overthrown does the working class set up the required new material conditions for the development of a mass communist/class consciousness.

The Russian Experience of October 1917

This introduction on the theoretical roots of councilism takes us back to where we had finished Chapter Six in Russia in the middle of 1917. The Bolsheviks themselves were not a *deus ex machina*. They were part of the revolutionary development of the Russian working class. As a party the Bolshevik Party did not start and finish 1917 as the same organisation. In the course of that momentous year, although it had the right raw material Bolshevism, was forged into a tool of the revolutionary proletariat. As we made clear in the last part of this series this was neither a mystical process nor was the outcome pre-ordained. First of all the Bolsheviks in 1914 remained true to a proletarian programme when the vast majority of the Social Democratic parties abandoned all that they claimed to stand for.

In second place the Bolsheviks were a grass roots organisation which, despite the arrest and exile of their leaders, worked in the factories and in the garrisons to take

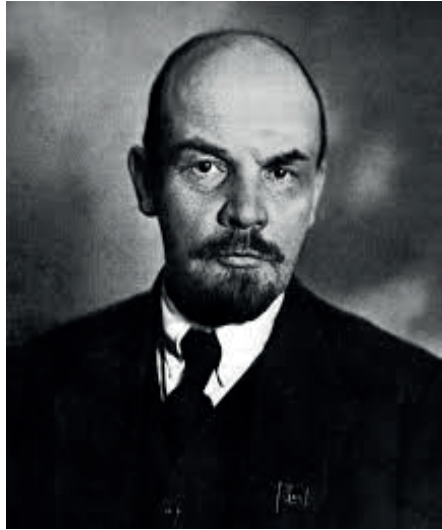
their anti-war message into the daily class struggle. The very fact that successive leaderships of the party were arrested or exiled meant that worker activists displayed a lot more initiative wherever they found themselves. Local activists did not have to wait for the leaders to tell them what to do. In some places like Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad, today Volgograd) the October Revolution actually started before that in Petrograd.

By the middle of 1917 the Bolsheviks were, in a certain sense, almost too successful. Once Lenin had convinced the party leaders in May to accept what the rank and file had known all along, i.e. that the Provisional Government had to be overthrown and an attempt to create socialism started, then the proletariat had a clear banner around which to rally. As the war effort of the Provisional Government ground to a halt in June the steadfast anti-war position of Bolshevism became the only hope for a working class facing starvation and a further mobilisation for yet one more suicidal offensive.

The July Days

Here though a further test of a proletarian party was to take place. Inevitably, given what we have already understood about the uneven development of class consciousness, some workers are more impatient to make the revolution than others and this was the case of the sailors based in Kronstadt, the naval fortress near Petrograd. In July 1917 they decided to follow up the June demonstration which had been called by those Soviet parties who supported the Provisional Government to show the Bolsheviks that they were an absolute minority. In the event it turned into a pro-Bolshevik demonstration against the Provisional Government with banners calling for immediate peace and the overthrow of the Provisional Government.

The sailors decided that an armed demonstration in favour of soviet power would now topple the Provisional Government. However the rest of the class was not yet ready. The consequences of the failure of the June Offensive had not yet sunk in to a wider layer of the class. This the Bolsheviks, present in the factories, understood so the sailors action left them in a terrible dilemma. Here demonstrating below the balcony of the Ksheshinskaia Palace, where the Bolsheviks had their headquarters, were thousands of armed sailors demanding that the Bolsheviks put themselves at the head of the demonstration (which, after all, only repeated the Bolshevik slogans of June) and march across the Liteiny Bridge straight towards the centre of



V. I. Lenin
1870-1924

the city. Lenin was horrified and even said to Podvoisky, the leader of the Bolshevik Military Organisation which was supposed to argue for their line within the barracks that he ought to be "thrashed" for not having warned the sailors earlier that what they were trying was premature. When called upon to greet the demonstrators Lenin basically told them to enjoy the demonstration but to peacefully return home as the Provisional Government might use it as a provocation to attack them. The sailors were mystified at this address. They did not see that, though they represented Bolshevik thinking the rest of the class would need more time to get to where they were.

The decision of the Bolsheviks in the July Days not to support the sailors nor

"Neither the party nor the soviets are in themselves insurance against counter-revolution. The only guarantee is the class consciousness of the working masses themselves."
Platform of the Internationalist Communist Tendency

to criticise them, undermines once and for all the bourgeois idea that they were simply a gang of putschists. The Bolshevik leadership as a whole knew that no action was possible without wider class support. On the contrary it was the Kronstadters (many of them anarchists) who were the putschists since they thought that all that was needed was for them to give a lead and the rest of the class would follow. As the best elements of the revolutionary proletariat were already moving into the Bolshevik Party, the Bolsheviks themselves knew that the tide of class opinion was still flowing in their direction but had not yet reached

sufficient strength for a showdown with the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks thus managed to tone down the demonstration a little without ever openly abandoning it to its fate. The Bolsheviks remained with the class.

For this reasons the Bolsheviks were proscribed, their press smashed up, their leaders imprisoned or forced to flee (like Lenin) and subjected to a massive lie campaign that they acted for Germany. But despite the Provisional Government's assault on the Bolsheviks, the working class hardly wavered in its support and the Bolshevik Party after an initial fortnight of decline re-emerged from the crisis stronger than ever.

October – Coup d'état or Revolution?

The Bolshevik revival was due to their depth of support in the class but the speed of their recovery was largely due to the infighting between the various strands of the bourgeoisie. When Kornilov, the man Kerensky had named as his new Army Commander, decided to lead an assault on Petrograd it was the Bolsheviks, because they were so deeply rooted in the working class who were the only force to organise resistance. The persuasion of Bolshevik activists undermined the purpose of Kornilov's troops (even the Savage Division – the former elite support for Tsarism) and the revolt simply faded away. The activity of the Bolsheviks made them the most significant factor in the consciousness of the urban working class in Russia and it was no surprise that they won 80% of the delegate places in elections to the two main soviets (Petrograd and Moscow). This was on the basis of the unambiguous slogans of "all Power to the Soviets" and "Down with the Provisional Government".

This was now the very concrete advance in consciousness that Lenin (still in exile) was waiting for. It indicated that the anti-capitalist, anti-Provisional Government sentiment of the workers was now so developed that the overthrow of the Provisional Government could now be undertaken. The actual planning of the insurrection was formally given to the Military Revolutionary Committee (headed by Trotsky) of the Petrograd Soviet which was virtually a Bolshevik body since they dominated it and the Mensheviks and SRs (except the Left SRs who were about to split from their bourgeois colleagues) did not attend it. However in the end it was not any detailed plan in advance which guaranteed victory, it was the general class consciousness inside the working class that the Provisional

Government was their class enemy.

When Kerensky decided to forestall any more armed demonstrations coming from the workers' districts to the north of the city by closing the bridges over the Neva his troops were stopped and arrested by the workers' militias who spotted that the bridges were about to be raised. This was the signal for the Military Revolutionary Committee to act and the city was taken over. Despite Eisenstein's propaganda film *October* this was done without bloodshed. Kerensky simply could not find loyal troops to defend a regime which had long before lost the confidence of the masses. Indeed it is important to state that it was only when the proletariat removed from the Soviet Executive the parties which had been shielding the Provisional Government (the Mensheviks and the SRs) that the total bankruptcy of the Kerensky regime was revealed. The October Revolution was neither the simple coup d'état of bourgeois propaganda, nor the great military triumph that the Soviet regime later portrayed, but the culmination of months of growing class awareness of the alternatives posed in 1917.

For Lenin the month of October had been very frustrating. The overwhelming support of the working class for Bolshevik delegates only underscored that the overthrow of the Provisional Government was on the agenda and he had been bombarding the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd with the request that they seize state power. The rest of the Bolshevik leadership prevaricated and it was only Kerensky's actions which galvanised them into action. They would have been lost if they had not been working in a situation in which the mass of the class was with them. This is the key to the issue. This chapter is not about the events of 1917 but we have had to look at 1917 in detail because this is the only raw experience we have of the relationship of party, class and consciousness in a real revolution. 1917 gives us the only direct evidence of how the proletariat can come to power. Our councilists, with whom we started this part of the article, often accept the bourgeois argument that October was a coup d'état; or if they don't, they have an illogical and unrealistic formula which says that the October Revolution was proletarian but the Bolsheviks who led it were bourgeois! What we have briefly tried to show here is that the distinction between party and class will blur in a situation where the party, by all measurable criteria, has the overwhelming support of the mass of the class. In the few months before October even many anarchists recognised that Bolshevism had gone beyond the old statist, reformist Social Democracy and they joined the party. Lenin

himself, whilst in exile in Finland recognised at this time in *State and Revolution* that

... the anarchists were justified in saying about such Social-Democrats that they were failing in their task of giving the workers a revolutionary education.
in *Selected Works* Vol 2 p. 283-4

This confluence of anarchism and Bolshevism in the Russian Revolution obviously should not be exaggerated but it is further evidence to show that the experience of 1917 was transforming the political landscape and forging a revolutionary instrument in the Bolshevik Party.

Councilists also cannot fault the Bolsheviks as the quintessential Soviet party. No other party stood so consistently for soviet power. Indeed one of the reasons why the revolution degenerated so quickly is that the other parties represented in the soviet did not maintain the same principles. On some occasions between 1918 and 1920 the Mensheviks, for example, were divided into three factions. One (usually around Martov) was in the soviets, another was neutral whilst a third negotiated with the Whites to get rid of soviet power. It was the same with the Left SRs who were not only in the Soviet but part of the Council of People's Commissars (i.e. the Soviet Government) until peace was signed with Germany. They then not only abandoned their government positions but also the soviet and returned to terrorism by assassinating the German ambassador and several Bolsheviks.

But that is not the only evidence that the Bolsheviks were the only party committed to workers councils. Under the Bolsheviks many more soviets were set up across Russia and in the first few months of the revolution Bolshevik leaders toured factories urging workers to recognise that the new system was based on participation not passivity.

Even the great debate between councilists and left communists that the factory committees were deliberately undermined by the Bolsheviks ignores the fact that it was the factory committees themselves that called for greater centralisation in order to function less chaotically. In some ways the factory committees issue is a bit of a sideshow as the real issue is the decline of soviet power and the growth of the role of the party in every avenue of life. This underlines the most important lesson of the Russian revolution. Whilst the party may represent the vanguard of the class it cannot take on the role of the mass of the class in transforming society. The party is not a government but a political

guide. In the circumstances of 1918-21 this was not understood. It was assumed that, until the world revolution the party could act as a sort of regent for the proletariat until it revived its conscious activity, but the history of proletarian class consciousness shows that this artificial way of looking at consciousness cannot work. Once the class in any generation begins to lose its conscious will to create a new society no artificial expedient can revive it.

Lenin knew this. It was the main reason why Lenin insisted that the Provisional Government had to be overthrown in October whilst the proletariat were prepared for it. However Lenin was making his arguments with the perspective that class consciousness was international and that whatever the weakness of the situation in Russia the world revolution would help to transform the material situation. As we now know history did not work out that way, the Russian revolution was isolated and the question of how an isolated proletarian bastion could survive was put on the agenda for the only time in our history. It is to the issue of how the Russian Revolution declined and its significance for us that we turn in the next chapter.

8

The Decline of the Russian Revolution and the Cult of the Party

Despite taking place a century ago the Russian Revolution remains the single most important event for shaping our understanding of the question of class consciousness in this epoch. As the only time in history when a self-consciously working class movement actually arrived at the head of state power it hands down to us a rich heritage of experience which we cannot ignore. In fact, so important is this event for our epoch that we have to return to it yet again.

In the last part we tackled the ideas of councilism which sprang up as the revolutionary period which followed the First World War came to a shuddering defeat. We consider that councilism is itself a distorted product of that counter-revolution because it actually theorises the idea that spontaneity alone will be enough to spark the revolutionary movement which will transform society. In doing so it actually does violence to the way in which class consciousness amongst a propertyless working class arises. Councilism blamed the Bolshevik Party as the agent of proletarian defeat, and councilists have gone on to argue that this was because the Bolsheviks were either insufficiently clear politically and programmatically or were even, in some versions, always counter-revolutionary in their ideas. This is both historically inaccurate and methodologically untenable.

The Bolsheviks, for good or ill, were the best elements in political terms that existed within the old Second International. Their position on the war alone made them the vanguard of, not just the Russian proletariat, but the international proletariat as well. We should also remember that, as we show in our pamphlet *1917*, Bolshevism wasn't just a movement which sprang from the head of one man, it was a political representation of the revolutionary working class and which was forged as a revolutionary party in the struggles of 1917 by responding to the actual class movement. As a result of that experience revolutionaries from many countries looked to them to lead the world revolution. However, this was a task which was actually beyond Bolshevism (or anyone else for that matter).

The Russian proletariat was a minority in a backward capitalist country. As all the Bolshevik leaders repeatedly stated in 1917-18 "without a German Revolution we are doomed". Or as Rosa Luxemburg put it, the question of socialism could only be posed in Russia. It would have to be answered further West. As that answer never came the question became one of survival rather



In 1917 the Bolsheviks inherited a food crisis of medieval proportions. Three further years of war led to the famine of 1921 some of whose victims are pictured here.

than revolutionary transformation. As we have said many times in the past there was nothing in Marxist theory which prepared an isolated proletarian bastion to deal with this question.

Bolshevik Errors and the Rise of the Party Dictatorship

Bolshevism was an instrument of the revolution forged in the class struggle but a revolutionary party is a fighting party. It is not an instrument of government. Fighting for the communist programme in the soviets is one thing, but becoming the government and the state is another. Whilst we can agree with the councilists that, despite its revolutionary origins, the Bolshevik Party was also the agent of the counter-revolution when the class movement was defeated, we have to differentiate ourselves from them in that we see this as a result of an objective process of defeat and not due to the pre-determined weaknesses of the Bolshevik Party. As we have shown in this series the Bolsheviks were the least hidebound, the most open to change of all the parties of the Second International.

This makes it all the more important for us to learn from the way in which the Russian Revolution collapsed into a bureaucratic counter-revolution, which ultimately spawned Stalinism. The first lesson is that no amount of revolutionary exhortation can turn around a material process. In the winter of 1917-18 even hostile observers concede that the Bolsheviks went around trying to get more workers to run their own system. In this period real grassroots soviet power expanded. Lenin's own exhortations in the factories were all along the lines of what he said at the Third Congress of Soviets in January 1918,

... socialism cannot be implemented by a minority, by the Party. It can be implemented only by tens of millions when they have learned to do it for themselves.¹

However, harsh reality was soon to undermine this early aspiration. In the first place during the course of the revolution of 1917 the Bolshevik Party had welded itself into a disciplined whole to lead the assault on bourgeois power. It was the largest and most all-Russian organisation in Russia by October 1917. However, proletarian revolutionary parties are not governmental parties. Whilst they lead the revolutionary assault they do not form the government as such (even if party members take important roles in the post-revolutionary society). As Lenin said repeatedly, in the winter of 1917-18 the proletariat as a whole have to build socialism.

Bolshevik practice however soon began to undermine this. To start with the Bolsheviks set up a cabinet of the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) to run the Departments of State. Calling the leaders of these Departments "People's Commissars" (Trotsky's brainwave) did not hide the fact that they were Ministers in the old sense. Instead of relying on the class-wide bodies of the soviets to elect an executive which ran the government, the Bolsheviks had already begun the process of supplanting soviet rule. This was not a conscious process but followed a recurrent pattern in every area of life in the RSFSR. In the early days Sovnarkom always made sure that the Soviet Executive (VTsIK) got the chance to discuss and reject Sovnarkom plans but in practice this happened less and less often as the revolution was faced with international invasion. The Soviets met less and less often, and the Congress of Soviets which began as quarterly affairs had ceased to be such by 1920. In some ways, even if the form of soviet rule had been more firmly adhered to it would have made little difference. The need to send the most class conscious workers to fight in the Red Army in the period 1918-20 tore the heart out of properly functioning soviets. The Party was quite rapidly transformed into the real governmental organisation in Russia. Again this was not planned in advance nor was it an immediate reality. The victory of October had led to

*an outburst of unfettered discussion and controversy unprecedented in the annals of the Bolshevik Party, and perhaps rare in those of any other.*²

However, the process of concentration of

power within the party had already begun. And with it came the domination of the Party over the organs of the state.

*The same men, sharing the same traditions and the same purpose, directed the affairs of party and state; the same incessant crisis and the same uninterrupted pressure of events weighed equally between 1917 and 1921 on party and Soviet institutions. The outstanding developments of these years in the machinery of the state – the concentration of central authority in the hands of Sovnarkom at the expense of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets and of VTsIK, and the concentration of authority at the centre at the expense of the local soviets and congresses of Soviets and their organs – had actually preceded the corresponding developments in the party organisation. For some time the lines of development in party and state ran parallel. Then, by and inevitable process they began to converge and finally, to coincide. This process had been virtually completed by the time of Lenin's death.*³

This is the schematic overview and takes in the whole period 1917-24. However the pattern is the same in every area. Even on the issue of the factory committees whose "suppression" the councilists make so much of, the truth is rather more complicated. It was clear to all that the factory committees were at best patchy in their performance. Workers on the railways who took to housing themselves in rolling stock rather than using it for running the railways for society is perhaps one of the more extreme examples but the factory committees were also dominated by Bolshevik workers who demanded greater coordination and centralisation. It was they, supported by the Left Communists who were the main opposition group inside the Party, who insisted on the setting up of the Supreme Economic Council or VESENKha. Even a liberal critic of the Revolution could write that:

The Council of People's Commissars took a step in the direction of the Leftist plan, apparently at the behest of the factory-committee leadership, with the creation of the Supreme Economic Council (and the authorisation for similar local councils) in December 1917. the council was initially dominated by Leftists – the first chairman was Osinsky, and the governing bureau included Bukharin, Lomov and Vladimir Smirnov. Despite the dubious success of the central and local councils in the ensuing months, they represented enough doctrinal momentum to evoke from Lenin a final expression of his 1917 anarchism. He

*declared to the congress of local economic councils held in May 1918: "The apparatus of the old state is doomed to die; but the apparatus of the type of our Supreme Economic Council is destined to grow, develop, and become strong, fulfilling all the most important functions of an organised society"*⁴

This though was at the end of what the Bolshevik economist L. Kritsman called later "The Heroic Period of the Revolution". It was a period which ended when the civil war broke out after the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany in March 1918. From now on the constant drain on the already shattered Russian working class was to further undermine the soviet principle.

Party and Class

Again we have to repeat that the degeneration of the revolution was not the result of any preconceived idea about the Party. At the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919 there was no babbling about the Party being the same as the class. On the contrary the relationship of Party and class was seen quite clearly

*The Communist Party sets as its goal the achievement of decisive influence and complete leadership in all organisations of the workers; in trades unions, in cooperatives, agricultural communes etc. The Communist Party especially tries to carry out its programme and its complete domination in the state organisations of the present time, the Soviets. The Party attempts to guide the activities of the Soviets but not to replace them.*⁶

This last line sums it up. The class wide organs represent the whole class whilst the Party represents only the vanguard. The most advanced workers alone cannot make the revolution since the revolution means the total social and economic transformation of the whole mode of production. It cannot be done by the minority. It is not that soviets (or any other class-wide body) are just a "nice idea". They are indispensable for the actual transformation of society and to return to the classical statement of Marx in *The German Ideology* it is this very process of the revolutionary movement which also transforms the consciousness of human beings.⁷ Soviets are the historically discovered solution to the problem of how to make the mass of the population the master of its own destiny. This brings us to the crux of the issue.

It is a result of the way class consciousness develops within the working class that the actual overthrow of capitalist rule will be carried out by a large minority led by a small minority. The party will be at the head of a larger movement. But overthrowing capitalist political domination and establishing a socialist society are two different things. The first can be achieved by a movement in which communists play the overwhelming role. However the question of constructing socialism is of an altogether different order. It requires that the majority of workers in every area of society are drawn into the creation of a new mode of production, a new political order and ultimately a totally different type of society which has lost all trace of the "muck of ages" (Marx). In the course of this the vast bulk of humanity will have their ideas transformed.

The problem thrown up by the Russian experience is that the best intentions are no use if the material situation works against the proletariat. An example of this is the issue of Party membership. In order to try to stop careerism the party only recruited at those times when the Civil War against the Whites was going badly so the consequences of joining the Party might be fatal for any given individual. This was supposed to ensure that the Party would maintain its revolutionary and proletarian purity – its revolutionary class consciousness. Laudable though this was (and it is difficult to see how the Bolsheviks could have acted better) the fact remained that less than 5% of the population of the old Russian Empire were working class. As many of these were already in the Party or fighting in the Red Army the scope for finding new recruits was limited. Despite this as the Party took on more and more of the functions of operating the system more and more were recruited. Party membership rose from tens of thousands in mid-1917 to 3 millions by 1921, but "bureaucratism" continued to be denounced at Soviet and Party Congresses. And all the way through the Civil War the soviets were dying as the most class conscious workers were fighting at the front.

The experience of the Russian Revolution also highlights how fragile working class consciousness could be. The Soviets had come to power after four years of slaughter and economic disaster. Professor Edward Acton⁸, who we have already quoted (see page 35) on the extremely dire economic situation in Russia at the end of 1917, describes it as akin to the Black Death in Medieval Europe. The Bolsheviks might get out of the war and they might redistribute the land but they could not magic up the

bread that had been so lacking for the last two years. This took its toll on the enthusiasm of the working class who had supported the Bolshevik drive for Soviet power in 1917. As Mary McAuley so graphically portrays it in her work on the Russian Revolution the workers were becoming apathetic as early as the spring of 1918. By the end of the year in some factories there were even some (admittedly a small minority) who called for the return of the Tsar.

*Sickness and starvation stalked the city. By March with calorie consumption down to little more than 1,500 a day, there was a rash of strikes in the factories. It was a desperate time. The Bolsheviks had to muster all their resources to calm the angry workers, some of whom were spreading the slogan 'Down with Lenin and horsemeat, Give us the Tsar and pork! Lenin came from Moscow to address the question directly before a huge meeting at the People's House, and a new rationing system was worked out. It was never quite so bad again but the three-quarters of a million inhabitants who survived the civil war were emaciated and sick by the end of 1920. Years of near subsistence diet had taken their toll physically and psychologically.'*⁹

This passage seems to pose the question as to how the Bolsheviks remained in power at all. One factor was the undoubted loyalty of the vast majority of workers to the soviet form even if this was not working in its original fashion. And there was the usual problem following a revolution of what constituted legitimate criticism and what was deemed to be subversive of the whole system. Here the problem was compounded by the splits in the oppositions. The Left SRs started off in the Soviet Government but left it via an act of terrorism. The Mensheviks split into at least three factions some of whom accepted working in the soviets (like Martov's Internationalists) whilst others went off to work with the opposition in the civil war but would then change their mind and return to work in the soviet. In the face of this the Bolsheviks themselves were split, with some insisting on the need to repress all opposition groups, and others trying to create a new soviet legality.

However this debate also shows that the Bolsheviks were themselves already becoming identified with the state, a process which only intensified as the civil war made all opposition appear as potentially aiding the White enemy. But the whole thing posed a question for the Bolsheviks which they did not really resolve. Mary McAuley again poses the problem well.

*In Bolshevik eyes it was the working class, led by their most advanced members in the Bolshevik Party that was going to build socialism. If the Petrograd workers should turn against or not follow the party, then the socialist endeavour would fail. The Bolsheviks needed the workers' support to justify their claim to rule. But what kind of support? From a bourgeois perspective all that could be expected was passive acquiescence but from the workers far more was called for. Without their active participation, initiative, and sacrifice, socialism was unachievable. For thousands of working-class activists who had become socialists under Tsarism it meant self-education, self-discipline and a willingness to sacrifice personal comfort and safety for the cause. At a **minimum** the Bolshevik Party needed the factory workers to vote for them rather than for the Mensheviks or SRs, and to pass factory resolutions in support of Bolshevik policies – and at times they had to be content with that – but if that was all they could count on was limited to these gestures from the **followers**, the socialist enterprise was doomed. Only if the workers were committed to a new way of working and living (particularly difficult in present conditions) would socialism be built. The Bolsheviks could not do it for them.*¹⁰

The Bolsheviks may have had some hangovers from the Social Democracy about the nature of socialism but their proletarian opposition to the war revealed that they had broken with many Social Democratic ideas and were the best representatives of the working class at that time. The notion developed since the defeat of the Russian Revolution by latter-day councilists (but not by earlier councilists like Pannekoek¹¹), or by anarchists like Voline¹² that the Bolsheviks had a preconceived plan to create a party state simply does not stand up to closer examination. A critical analysis of Bolshevik errors finds that the debates inside the Bolsheviks about the future of the revolution at that time raised precisely the issues we are talking about today. It wasn't the lack of consciousness within the Russian working class movement that led to the disastrous outcome of the USSR, but the objective conditions in which the revolutionaries of the time operated.

As the isolation of the Russian proletariat continued the decline of the revolution set in. We can see this in the reports of contemporaries. In 1919 Arthur Ransome still found life in the grassroots functioning of provincial soviets but returning in 1920 he found that this had all but vanished.¹³ The increasing bureaucratism and the decline

of real soviet life led to the setting up of the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (*Rabkrin*) which was supposed to involve ordinary workers to act as a check on the bureaucracy. Its members were supposed to be elected by other workers in the same way as soviet delegates, and membership was supposed to rotate to give as many proletarians, men and women, as much experience as possible. This was, in reality, a perfect recognition of the decline of the hopes for the soviet democracy of 1917-18. As with all artificial solutions to a real problem it achieved nothing, except to give Stalin a further power base from which to interfere in every aspect of soviet life. Despite criticism from all sides, Lenin still held out the prospect that it could be reformed as late as 1922. By 1923, partially because he had dimly seen the danger of Stalin, he was stating that it did not "enjoy a vestige of authority" and had joined those, like Trotsky and Preobrazhensky, who were calling for its overthrow.

The Russian Communist Left

Equally disastrous was the decline of the way in which the party and state institutions functioned internally. To some, even amongst the communist left, the term "democratic centralism" has today been discredited. This is only because it has become distorted through the experience of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (as it later became).

Originally, democratic centralism meant a dual process where policy was decided by the party from the bottom up and then it became incumbent on all members to carry it out. The members still had the right to criticise the policy internally but it remained the policy until a subsequent decision of the whole party rejected it. The long-drawn out debates over the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk show that the principle was still alive and well in 1918. At the Ninth Party Congress in March 1920 an opposition around Sapronov developed taking the title "Democratic Centralists" (or Dekists for short) calling for an end to the growing adoption of one-man management in all spheres of life. Sapronov stated that the supposed basis of the party and soviet organs was democratic centralism but this had been replaced by "vertical centralism".¹⁴

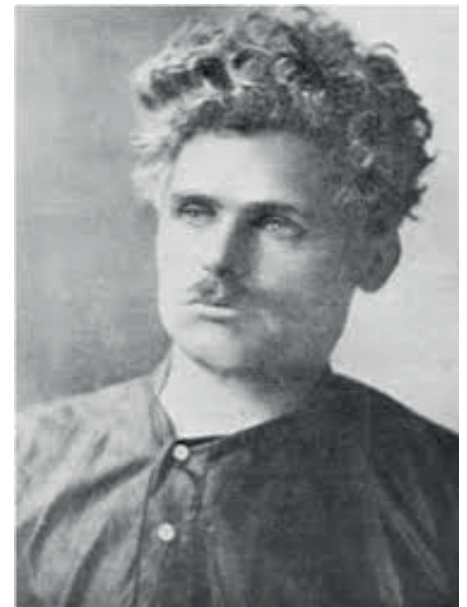
He pointed to the shower of complaints from local bodies of encroaching interference from the centre. But, to illustrate the problems facing the Russian working class, the opposition agreed to the unhappy solution of a "control commission" where ordinary workers could denounce party members, however high up in the system.

This was later to become the *Rabkrin* we have already criticised.

This fact only confirms what we have been arguing. There are no solutions to problems which don't take into account the material reality of the situation. Contrary to the myth of the Bolshevik monolith later maintained by Stalinist and liberal commentators alike, the opposition to the decline of the revolution within the Bolshevik Party was stubborn and continuous throughout the Civil War period and even after it. There is hardly a Party Congress between the Eighth in 1918 and the death of Lenin, where an opposition of one sort or another is not able to speak (even after the formal banning of factions at the Tenth Congress in 1921 they continued to exist). This opposition, though, remained fairly weak. This is not because of the enormous prestige of Lenin, nor of the lack of talent of the opposition leaders. Bukharin, Radek, Preobrazhensky, Sapronov, Lomov, Ossinsky, Piatakov, Kollontai, Shlyapnikov and Smirnov were all involved, at one time or another, in trying to hold back the tide of counterrevolution. Some of these, like the Left Communists of 1918, the Democratic Centralists, the Workers' Truth group and the Communist Workers' Group were politically the indirect ancestors of much of the thinking of today's communist left. In one definition these were distinguished by a characterisation of Social Democracy and the Second International as capitalist organisations, the left wing of the bourgeoisie, and therefore counter-revolutionary worldwide (i.e. not only in Russia). This was the basis of their opposition to the United Front. This represents a rejection of the notion of "bourgeois workers" parties which Lenin and others saw as the right-wing of the workers' movement;

- *insistence on the Soviets and soviet democracy as the basis of the dictatorship of the proletariat;*
- *opposition to substitutionism and the fusion of the party with the state apparatus;*
- *opposition to the notion of state capitalism being a progressive and necessary stage in the struggle for communism;*
- *opposition to the right of nations to self-determination and national liberation wars as reactionary;*
- *support for all the defensive and economic struggles of the workers;*
- *opposition to parliamentarism and participation in elections;*
- *opposition to trades unionism in all its forms*¹⁵

But, for all their clarity, the communist left,



Timofei Sapronov: leader of the 'Democratic Centralists' attempted to restore internal debate in the party.

and indeed the other oppositions, could not resist the tide of counterrevolution that was sweeping not just Russia but the entire world. Some of them (like Ossinsky) did however argue that it would be better to separate party and state in order to preserve the clarity of the communist programme. The *Theses of the Left Communists* in 1918 clearly understood that the party itself could become the manager of the counter-revolution and this to them would be the worst outcome because that would mean that the revolutionary programme would be lost. If there is no revolutionary programme there is no revolutionary party and a whole generation is lost to the revolution. This prescience was actually too optimistic since the nightmare that today's communists have to live with is the legacy of the degeneration of the revolution.

Even before Stalin's time, and despite all the sound theoretical and organisational instincts of the Bolsheviks, the Party gradually absorbed the state, the soviets were reduced to rubber stamps and then, after the fact, came the rationalisation of the "dictatorship of the party" as the "dictatorship of the proletariat". Even here there was a gradual process of shifting the meaning of the phrase. When Lenin first defended the idea of the "dictatorship of the party" in 1919 he also said that the party's ideas can only be carried out in reality by the new body, the soviets, but by December 1920 (the very month in which the civil war against the Whites and Allied imperialism was won) he was stating,

...the dictatorship of the proletariat cannot be exercised through an organisation

embracing the whole of that class, because in all capitalist countries (and not only over here, in one of the most backward) the proletariat is still so divided, so degraded and so corrupted ... that an organisation taking in the whole of the proletariat cannot directly exercise proletarian dictatorship. It can be exercised only by a vanguard that has absorbed the revolutionary energy of the class.¹⁶

This is mysticism not materialism. It has more in common with the fascist myth that the Fuehrer/Duce is the real expression of the will of the nation than with the Marxist materialist Lenin of 1917-18. Nor was Lenin consistent in his declining years. At the Eleventh Party Congress in March 1922 he seems to have realised that it had all gone terribly wrong.

...and if we take that huge bureaucratic machine, that gigantic heap, we must ask who is directing whom? I doubt very much whether it can be truthfully said that the Communists are directing that heap. To tell the truth they are not directing they are being directed.¹⁷

Those were virtually Lenin's last words on the condition of the revolution and naturally they were brushed aside. Indeed, now that the party dictatorship was accepted, it remained only for Lenin's successors to pronounce their own dictatorship. Zinoviev, at the Twelfth Party Congress, went on to argue that not only was it a good thing to have "the dictatorship of the party" but, in Lenin's absence, went one stage further.

We need a single strong, powerful central committee which is leader of everything ... the central committee is the central committee because it the same central committee for the Soviets, and for the trades union and for the cooperatives, and for the provincial executive committees, and for the whole working class. In this consists its role of leadership, in this is expressed the dictatorship of the party.¹⁸

And by 1928, of course, the General Secretary would express the dictatorship of the proletariat. The idea that communism was about the withering away of the state had itself long since withered away. The Communist Left had issued a siren call to warn of the process but in the dangerous situation of 1918-21 they had been ignored. With no world revolution to reverse the situation, a purely Russian solution could not be socialist (and Lenin had never pretended that socialism had even been minimally established in Russia).



The tragic suppression of Kronstadt signalled the beginning of the counter-revolution in earnest.

The end of the civil war posed a new situation for the Bolsheviks but, as they were working out a response, the Kronstadt Commune rose to demand a change of policy. Obsessed with the idea that Kronstadt would fall into White or Allied hands the RCP (B) did not negotiate seriously and went in for military repression. Bolsheviks in Kronstadt divided and some fought their own party comrades. Thousands went into exile and thousands more were arrested and some were shot.

The tragedy was compounded by the fact that within a few days the RCP (B) 10th Party Congress adopted the New Economic Policy or NEP (which followed the lines of the Kronstadters' main economic demands). The introduction of NEP was basically a restoration of the capitalist market but it was a "success" if judged in terms of its effects. The fact that there were no more Kronstadts was not just due to the increase of Cheka repression but also to a decline of revolutionary activity throughout the working class. The improved material conditions under NEP led workers to gradually abandon demands for more revolutionary policies and properly functioning soviets. Increasingly the state was able to mobilise the masses of workers behind its campaigns. This was the anti-revolutionary trade-off.¹⁹ In return for improved living standards workers' revolutionary consciousness was gradually abandoned. The road to Stalinism gradually opened up. All the oppositions' attempts to reassert communist ideas foundered in the face of a working class which had faced 7 years of imperialist war, disease and famine, and which now wanted nothing more than a better standard of living. Revolutionary consciousness, as we have shown, is a fragile thing which can disappear as rapidly as it arrives. The fact that Russian workers had sustained their "revolutionary dreams"²⁰ for so long is a testimony to both their tenacity and their class consciousness.

We reject the idea that the failure of the

Russian Revolution was primarily because of the *a priori* attitudes of the Bolsheviks but what we today suffer from is the fact that the vanguard did not remain a vanguard of the class. It merged with the state apparatus of a single territory. It thus ceased to be able to maintain a communist programme for the international stage. This has to be the role of the communist vanguard of the future. It has to be international and centralised and to stick to the task of holding up the revolutionary programme on an international stage. It is to this aspect of class consciousness and political organisation that we turn in our next chapter.

Notes

1 The course of how Lenin's thinking on the role of the Party degenerated as the revolution declined can be found in condensed form in the documents in J. Daborn *Russia: Revolution and Counterrevolution 1917-24* (Cambridge University Press, 1991) pp. 80-2

2 The abandonment of the Red Guard militias for the building of a Red Army was one of the vital steps in the construction of a new state. Lenin theorised in *The State and Revolution* that the state was built on two pillars – a standing army and a bureaucracy. Despite this, with the formation of the Red Army the Bolsheviks were abandoning the notion of the armed soviets (which as a semi-state would later "wither away") for the first step in building a new state. The material situation of an isolated RSFSR under attack from international imperialism may have made this step necessary but it only underlines how a revolution in one area can only succeed ultimately if the rest of the world proletariat is in a position to at least halt the plans of the other imperialist powers.

3 E.H. Carr *The Bolshevik Revolution Volume 1* p.194

4 Carr *op. cit.* p.220

5 R.V. Daniels *The Conscience of the Revolution* Simon and Schuster 1960 p.84

6 Quote in W.H. Chamberlin *The Russian Revolution Vol. II* (Macmillan 1965 p.363

7 See Chapters One and Two.

8 "In the aftermath of October, the country suffered an economic collapse on the scale of a modern Black Death" in *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (Arnold 1990) p.204

9 From Mary McAuley *Bread and Justice: State and Society in Petrograd 1917-22* (Oxford 1991) p.280

10 *op. cit.* p.240

11 See his pamphlet *Workers Councils* (1940)

12 See *Six Weeks in Russia 1919* and *The Crisis in Russia 1920* both published in 1992 by Redwords.

13 In his *Nineteen Seventeen* (Freedom Press 1954). Volin should be credited with being the first to criticise the formation of Sovnarkom as a body which replicated the Provisional Government and stood above (and thus potentially outside) the Soviets.

14 Carr, *op. cit.* pp.223

15 I.R. Hebbes *The Communist Left in Russia* (originally an unpublished dissertation which the author gave to us before his untimely death). It has since been published by the International Communist Current in their book, *The Russian Communist Left*.

16 Quoted in Daborn *op. cit.* p.82

17 Lenin *Collected Works* (Moscow 1966) Vol. 33

18 Carr, *op. cit.* pp.236-7

19 See Simon Pirani's *The Russian Revolution in Retreat 1921-4* (Routledge 2009)

20 Title of a work by Richard Stites (Oxford 1989) which examines all the "utopian" experiments carried out in the period 1917-

28. Although well aware of the increasing authoritarian nature of the regime in 1920s Russia Stites makes clear that there was a greater degree of social freedom in the first ten years after 1917 than after Stalin came to the top denouncing any notions of equality as cretinous.

9

The Idealism of Bordigism

So far we have been arguing that for the working class, a class without a form of property to develop, or defend, the only permanent way it can unite is in the form of an organisation with a programme that expresses its revolutionary consciousness. Thus a political organisation like a party is an inevitable product of a revolutionary working class. However significant this party becomes numerically, it will always remain a minority, since we hold to Marx's view that it is **only in the process of revolution itself** that the majority of the class will have their view of the world transformed.

The actual preparation for, and leading of, the overthrow of the capitalist state worldwide, therefore, are tasks for which the class struggle creates an international party. However, as we saw earlier, the nature of that party and its relationship to the class was not clearly understood by most Social Democrats. It was still an issue in both the Communist International and in the debates in the Italian Left trying to get to grips with an unprecedented counter-revolution. It is to this we now turn.

The Communist International

The most revolutionary international political organisation created in the revolutionary wave after the First World War was the Communist International. The Communist or Third International was set up in Moscow in 1919. It had originally been planned to hold the founding Congress in Germany but the premature revolt of the Spartakists and their subsequent massacre led to that option being ruled out.

The life of the International really began with the Second Congress in 1920. The *Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution* reaffirmed the basic Marxist position on the relation of the Party to the development of the class struggle (although the Darwinian reference to "the process of natural selection" might have been omitted).

1. The Communist Party is a part of the working class, namely, the most advanced, most class-conscious, and hence revolutionary part. By a process of natural selection, the Communist Party is formed of the best, most class conscious, most devoted and far-sighted workers. The Communist Party has no interests other than the interests of the working class as a whole. The Communist Party is differentiated from the working class as a whole by the fact that it has a clear view of the entire historical path of the working

class in its totality and endeavours, at every bend in this road, to defend the interests not of separate groups or trades, but of the working class as a whole.

The Theses also went on to underline the significance of the role of the Communist Party in relation to the class-wide organs like the workers' councils or soviets.

The rise of the soviets as the historically-discovered basic form of the dictatorship of the proletariat does not in any way diminish the leading role of the Communist Party in the proletarian revolution. When the German "Left" communists say [see their appeal to the German proletariat of 14 April 1920 signed Communist Workers Party of Germany (KAPD – ed.)] that "the party too must adapt itself more and more to the soviet idea and assume a proletarian character" [Kommunistische Arbeiterzeitung No.54] this is a confused expression of the idea that the Communist Party should merge in the soviets, and that the soviets should replace the Communist Party. This idea is basically wrong and reactionary.

There was a period in the history of the Russian revolution when the soviets were opposed to the proletarian party and supported the policy of the agents of the bourgeoisie. The same was true of Germany. The same is possible in other countries too.

In order that the soviets may be able to achieve their historical tasks, a strong Communist Party is essential, a party which does not simply "adapt" itself to the soviets but is able to ensure that soviets do not "adapt" themselves to the bourgeoisie and to white-guard social democracy, a party which through its fractions in the soviets is able to make them follow it.

Thesis 8

And how could it be otherwise, unless we think that communist consciousness is generated by anyone other than those parts of the working class which are already fighting to change the system? The Theses though remain silent on the precise relationship between the party and the soviet and this would turn out to be a significant omission. What the Russian Revolution taught us, was that the building of socialism, the actual changing of the mode of production, can only be achieved by the majority of the working class themselves, through their class-wide organs (in the Russian case, the Soviets). If the soviets fail to adopt and carry out communist measures then the revolutionary situation has passed.

There is no way that the party can take on this role itself. What the Party is **not** is a government in waiting (in the sense that bourgeois parties are) nor does it take on the role and functions of the state.

When the Bolsheviks initially came to power they had some understanding of this. Lenin constantly exhorted workers in the first few months after October 1917 to build socialism themselves because “no-one can do it for you”.¹ The clearest sign that the counter-revolution was on the march came when the Bolsheviks, faced with the need to create a standing army (the Red Army) to fight the Whites and international imperialism in the civil war of 1918-21 embarked on the path of state building.

Accompanying this was the creation of a vast bureaucracy which, in time, became part of a new ruling class, with even (after the Second World War) the right to pass on hereditary privileges. After Kronstadt many Bolsheviks concluded that the Party was the state and began to theoretically justify Party rule as in the best interests of the working class. Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat” was interpreted as “dictatorship of the party”. This was not fully understood at the time and this partial understanding is reflected in the *Theses on the Role of the Communist Party in the Proletarian Revolution*. Whilst Theses 9 and 11 are correct in seeing the need for the Communist Party to continue in existence until the final abolition of class society, Thesis 10 is more a description of the existing state of affairs in the RSFSR rather than a theoretical analysis of the path to international proletarian emancipation. It ends

In the organisation of a new proletarian Red Army, in the real destruction of the bourgeois state apparatus and its replacement by the beginnings of a new proletarian State apparatus, in the fight against narrow craft tendencies among groups of workers, in the struggle against local and regional “patriotism”, in clearing the way for the creation of a new labour discipline – in all these fields the Communist Party has the decisive word. By their own example the members must inspire and lead the majority of the working class.

Sure, the Communist Party members must inspire the rest of the working class but the references to the “proletarian state apparatus” are already pointing in the wrong direction. In *The State and Revolution* Lenin had understood that the working class would produce at most a “semi-state” which would lose its oppressive character with the

suppression of the last exploiting class in history. But this was written in 1917 and the reality was that from 1918 on the proletarian experience in Russia was already in retreat. And by 1920 the confusion between party and state was already undermining the idea that the international extension of the revolution was the main task of the Communist Party.

Whilst its members can “inspire and lead the majority of the working class in the soviets” the Party as a body is not an institution of any existing territory conquered by the working class. Its task is to spread the international revolution. In this sense it was tragic that the Comintern’s founding congress was not held in Germany as had originally been planned. This would have underlined that the Communist International was **an instrument of world revolution** and not an arm of the Russian state as it inevitably became once the revolutionary wave had retreated.

As it was, the Communist International did become part of the apparatus of a new state and increasingly became an instrument of its foreign policy in the struggle with the imperialist states (into whose orbit the new state was forced to gradually operate). And this is precisely where the distinction between party and state has to be made. If the soviets in any given proletarian bastion need to create Red Armies, or other institutions which are part of a new state, that is a temporary step backward that they might be forced to take. Even if its own members are involved in the debates in those soviets the Party, as a body, remains outside that process. In Russia the civil war and the decimation of the original revolutionary class meant that, as we saw in previous chapters, the party took on more and more state roles.

Worse still, the identification of the Party with the state, and not with the international proletarian struggle, also undermined the prospects for defending communism on a global scale. The consequences of this failure live with us today. And it was in the international sphere that the ancestors of today’s Communist Left (and therefore of the Internationalist Communist Tendency) first emerged as a distinct tendency. There is a lot of confusion surrounding this both in theoretical and historical terms so we need to look at this here. At the same time the debates in the internationalist communist left also highlights the need to look at the nature of the class party itself.

The Italian Left

If the error of those who today look for inspiration to the councilist currents that pay homage to the German Left (see Chapter 6) is to deny the need for an any organisation which gives expression to our revolutionary class consciousness, the error of those who emerged from the Italian Left, whom we today call Bordigists, is to see the Party as not only the instrument of revolutionary leadership but also as the organ of rule after the revolution.

They arrive at this position by a very neat piece of logic which is undialectical in that it just happens to leave out the context in which communism will have to be built. Whilst capitalist democracy depends for its functioning on the passivity of the workers, the future communist “semi-state” will be totally different from anything seen previously. It can only succeed via the **active** involvement of the majority of the working class. Its only justification for existence is the continuing existence of hostile social classes. Once these are no more, and a classless society emerges, the state will wither away and the organs of political rule will become organs of rational economic decision-making – the society of “freely associated producers” foreseen in the *Communist Manifesto*.

However this is to anticipate our argument. In the 1920s our ancestors in the Communist Party of Italy, a party founded by the Left under the leadership of the redoubtable figure of Amadeo Bordiga, shared a common critique of the degeneration of the Third International. For them the adoption at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921 of the slogan “To the masses” was not necessarily an error since it depended on what going to the masses meant. If it meant uniting all workers in common struggles that was fine, but if it meant united fronts with the leaders of the very Socialist Parties which had already refused to join the Communist International, for the very good reason that they were against revolution, then that was not only opportunism but even a dereliction of class duty.

The Italian Left did not however split over this but continued to fight to keep the Comintern on the path of international revolution. They persisted in seeing themselves as a section of an internationally centralised party. Indeed it could be argued that they took this principle to extremes since they accepted that as they were in a minority within the International in fighting the united front policies adopted at the Fourth Comintern Congress in 1922 then it was logical for the Comintern leadership



Amadeo Bordiga
1889-1970

(which was naturally dominated by the Russian Party) to replace Bordiga and the Left as the leaders of the Italian Party even though there was an overwhelming majority for both Bordiga and the positions of the Left in the Italian Party. Even the entry of Serrati's Socialist Party centrists into the party did not undermine the popularity of the Left and Gramsci (chosen by the Comintern to lead the PCd'Int when Bordiga was imprisoned by the fascists) had to resort to methods Stalin would have been proud of in 1926 at the Lyons Congress to ensure that the Comintern's line was accepted.²

The Red Two Years 1919-20

It was the tradition of the Italian Left Communists around Bordiga which gave the most coherent support to the revolutionary ideas of Marx on class and class consciousness. At the time of the factory occupations in Turin in 1919-20 Bordiga had already argued against the Ordinovisti led by Gramsci, that the economic struggle of the class, even if it was for control of the means of production, was quite compatible with the bourgeois order, and did not generate its own independent socialist consciousness.³

Further Bordiga re-stated the Marxist axiom, that the dominant ideas are those of the ruling class, and that under conditions of capitalist exploitation, a majority of the proletariat can not become conscious communists. Only by forming a political party, of necessity grouping a minority of the class, could the proletariat begin to assert its ideological independence from the ruling-class. The party, by distilling and restoring to the class its own historical experience, and the lessons thereof, could bring about the transformation of sparks of

consciousness of individual workers into the revolutionary class consciousness necessary for overthrowing the capitalist order. In that same revolutionary process, led by the party, ever greater layers of the proletariat would, in the course of a practical movement, raise their consciousness to that of its advanced guard. The results of the great class battles of the Italian workers of 1919-20 confirmed this analysis.

Whilst Gramsci was lauding the factory occupations of the Biennio Rosso (Red Two Years) as "soviets" Bordiga correctly pointed out that these were more like factory committees rather than soviets or class wide organs of workers' rule. Bordiga also argued against the idea that the factory committees could manage production and make capitalism irrelevant without challenging the capitalist political system.

We would not like the working masses to get the idea that all they need to do to take over the factories and get rid of the capitalists is set up councils...

These futile and continual outbursts which are daily exhausting the masses must be merged together, organised into one great comprehensive effort which aims directly at the heart of the enemy bourgeoisie.

This function can and must only be exercised by the communist party which, at the present moment, has not, and must not have, any other task than that of directing its activity to making the working masses more conscious of the necessity for this political step. This is the only direct way they will gain possession of the factory, while to proceed otherwise will be to struggle in vain.

Bordiga in *Il Soviet* 22.2.1920, reprinted in Antonio Gramsci: *Selected Political Writings 1910-20* ed. Quintin Hoare, p.235

These turned out to be prophetic words when the massive spontaneous struggles of the class failed to challenge the state, failed to generate socialist consciousness, and instead, trapped in the ideology of self-management, were led to defeat. Bordiga now criticised the idea of consciousness emerging from "forms" of economic struggle.

A totally wrong interpretation of Marxist determinism and a limited conception of the part played by consciousness and will in the formation, under the original influence of economic factors, of the revolutionary forces, led a great many people to look for a mechanical system of organisation which by itself would be enough to make the

masses move towards revolution with the maximum revolutionary efficiency.
Party and Class 1921

It is correct to say that the daily class struggle does not produce communist understanding automatically in the whole class; it does not even produce it automatically in any single proletarian. Even those proletarians, such as Weitling and Dietzgen, who contributed to socialist thinking, did so by scientific study of working class history, and the restoration of its lessons to the class by political action. The conditions of proletarian existence enable only a minority to be receptive to such doctrines under capitalist exploitation. This leads to the formation of a party, and the transformation of the workers' experience into consciousness and will.

The class originates from an immediate homogeneity of economic interests which appear as the primary motive force of the tendency to destroy and go beyond the present mode of production. But in order to assume this task, the class must have its own thought, its own critical method, its own will bent on precise ends by research and criticism, and its own organisation of struggle channelling and utilising with the utmost efficiency its collective efforts and sacrifices. All this constitutes the Party.
Party and Class 1921

The Errors of Bordigism

There were however some distortions in Bordiga's view of class consciousness. In the years of counter-revolution during which Bordiga avoided all contact with his comrades in the Italian Left, these errors hardened into political positions which eventually turned out to be a step backwards. Bordiga was quite right to insist that one cannot speak of communist consciousness in the proletariat, or of the independence of the class until,

we can recognise a social tendency, or a movement oriented towards a given end, then we can recognise the existence of a class in the true sense of the word. But then the party exists in a material if not yet in a formal way.
Party and Class 1921

But it is quite wrong to move from this point, and to assert that if the class party does not exist, then the class itself does not exist. Or, as he put it,

One cannot even speak of a class unless a minority of this class tending to organise itself into a political party has come into existence.

From this it is but a logical short step to seeing the class in itself, struggling economically at the level of class identity, as being simply a class for capital, and its experience as worthless. In the conception of Bordiga's heirs, the International Communist Party (I.C.P.), the programme becomes a set of commandments, divorced from class experience, or at best merely confirmed by it, rather than, as in the living Marxist conception, being enriched by it.

Marxist theory is one invariant bloc from its origins to its final victory. The only thing it expects from history is to find itself more and more strictly applied, and consequently, more and more deeply engraved with its invariant features.

Communist Programme 2 p.7

Apart from sounding like a piece of Hegelian teleology this insistence on "invariance" appears to ignore, not only the theoretical advances and changes Marx made in his views in the course of his reflection on the development of the class struggle, but also the contribution of the class' action towards the enriching of the communist programme. For example, Marx's position on the state, from that of taking it over, to that of smashing it, came directly from the experience of the Paris Commune of 1871. It is quite true to say that, though it was the Parisian workers who "stormed heaven" (Marx) in that year, it was Marx, on the basis of the experience of the Commune, who developed the theory of the proletarian dictatorship, and not the Paris workers, either individually or collectively. Nevertheless, it was the concrete class experience which furnished the basis for the development of Marxist theory – in this case as in others.

Party and Class

However, the misformulations in Bordiga's positions, which later flourished as caricatures in the various Bordigist International Communist Parties, have not remained unchallenged in the tradition of the Italian left. The recognition that it is necessary for the working class to struggle and create a class party which encapsulates its revolutionary class consciousness, has always been defended by our comrades of the Internationalist Communist Party (PCIInt.). They strongly argued that this party cannot be "the product of the last minute" but has to exist to defend communist positions within the working class before any revolutionary outbreak, however small and unpopular its appeal under normal capitalist conditions of exploitation. It was with this understanding that the Internationalist

Communist Party was founded by Onorato Damen, Luciano Stefanini ("Mauro"), and others, in clandestinity in 1943.

It soon attracted most of those members of the Italian Left who had survived the attacks of Stalinism, Nazism and Fascism, either inside or outside Italy. Bordiga, who had said nothing political since 1927, at first did not support it. He initially counselled his supporters to enter the Stalinist Italian Communist Party (PCI) of Togliatti but eventually the success of the new party attracted his support. However his ideas had by now fossilised and he soon began to argue against the founding tenets of the PCIInt. There were many issues over which he split the party in 1951 but the issue of the nature and role of the Party was one of the most significant. Whilst the "Bordigists" (as they are known henceforth) argued that

The proletarian state can only be animated by a single party ... the communist party will rule alone and will never give up power without a physical struggle...

Proletarian Dictatorship and Class Party (from Battaglia Comunista 3, 4 and 5, 1951 – translated in Communist Program (March 1976) p.49

the Internationalist Communist Party argued in their Political Platform of 1952 that,

There is no possibility of working class emancipation, nor of the construction of a new social order, if this does not emerge from the class struggle...

At no time and for no reason does the proletariat abandon its combative role. It does not delegate to others its historical mission, and it does not give power away to anyone, not even to its political party. (p.5-6, our emphases).

Bordigism seems ossified around the Theses of the Comintern in 1920 which were already, as we have seen affected by the transformation of the Russian Party into a new ruling class. Indeed Bordigism's "invariant" communist programme seems to suffer from a selective kind of invariance. The idea that the workers need a one party state is added to their dogma but the possibility that soviets offer in creating a semi-state which will wither away once the bourgeoisie are suppressed is a dangerous novelty! However criticising Bordigist errors is relatively easy. It is more difficult to go on from this and elaborate a coherent Marxist position on class consciousness. Since we feel our comrades have done so, we can do no better than allow them to speak for themselves.

Once again we return to the essential point of communist doctrine according to which there is a great difference between "class instinct" and "class consciousness". The first is born and develops within the workers struggles as a patrimony of the workers themselves; it comes from the antagonism of material interests and is nourished by the growing economic, social and political conditions brought about by this antagonism. The second consciousness is born out of the scientific examination of class contradictions, it grows with the growth of knowledge of these contradictions; it lives and is nourished by the examination and elaboration of facts coming from the historic experiences of the class ... Socialist consciousness is scientific reflection on the experiences of the class and on the problems it poses, developed by those who have the means to undertake this reflection, and who identify themselves politically with the class.

(Prometeo, First Semester 1978)

This discussion takes us back to the issues posed in the first two chapters. The apparent contradiction between Marx's ideas that "the dominant ideas are everywhere those of the ruling class" yet "the emancipation of the working class must be the task of the workers themselves" is resolved only by recognising proletarian organisation is two-fold. It first needs a political instrument which unites and elaborates its collective, anti-capitalist, consciousness. This body transforms the abstract lessons of proletarian past experience into a concrete programme of class action. Second it needs class-wide bodies which, when they take on the communist programme, are the real means of transformation of society.

The very existence of these organisations is not a guarantee of proletarian victory but without both of them (or other as yet undiscovered organisations like them) we cannot even talk of a real possibility of success.

The Nature of a Class Party

One other issue which arises naturally from the Bordigist split from the PCIInt is the nature of the class party. Most people who support the idea of proletarian emancipation but who reject the idea of the Party also base their view on the negative experiences of the past. This is particularly true of the evolution of the Bolshevik Party into the Stalinist monster it became in the 1930s. This evolution began before the death of Lenin and, as we have seen, was intimately connected with the Party becoming the state itself.

The banning of factions at the Tenth Party Congress of 1921 has enormous significance in this respect because it also represented the Bolshevik abandonment of one of its previous greatest strengths which was the existence of a multiplicity of opinions within it. It was the Bolsheviks' lack of monolithism which was the source of their dynamism within the working class. The Bolsheviks' pre-revolutionary orientation to the working class, and its almost isolated stance on turning imperialist war into civil war, were the bedrocks for its transformation into real instrument of the class in 1917.

Bolshevism did not spring from the pages of *What is to be Done?* but from its direct appeal to the rising level of class consciousness as the war progressed.⁴ The significant point from this episode is that the party, however small (and the Bolsheviks had only 8,000 members in February 1917) has to exist prior to a general revolutionary event. By maintaining the revolutionary programme (produced by the historic experience of the working class) within the working class (however unpopular this can appear in the short term), it can become the vehicle around which the working class can rally in its initial assault on capitalism.

Inside the Bolshevik Party the guiding principle was that of "democratic centralism". This meant that the Party leadership was elected by its members and that key policy issues were decided by Congresses of the entire membership. In the years before 1917 and right up until 1921 the Bolshevik Party was characterised by sharp disagreements and serious but lively debates at all levels. It was this capacity for rank and file initiative which helped to make Bolshevism such a dynamic force within the working class. This rank and file activity was actually a better guarantee of a healthy internal life than democratic centralism since with the falling off of local initiative during the civil war the party began to degenerate. Under Stalin the final touches to this degeneration meant distorting the party's own history. Monolithism and "discipline" came to be identified and praised as the sources of the party's success in 1917. This rewriting of the real history of Bolshevism was central to the Stalinist myth of the omniscient Party (and Great Leader).

The democratic element in "democratic centralism" was first undermined by Stalin's control over appointments of local party secretaries (who rigged elections), and then by the system of patronage which completed the transformation of what had

once been a fighting force for revolution into a new ruling class. Democratic centralism understood only as Stalinist centralism still makes the term obnoxious to many people today. The key issue is not what you call it but the recognition that there not only has to be some mechanism for the party members to decide on the policy and direction of their own party. The toleration of factions, and even tendencies, and a mechanism for ensuring internal democracy are basic to ensuring the vitality of a revolutionary organisation.

Faced with its own struggle against the degeneration of the Comintern the Italian Left also gave some attention to this issue. As democratic centralism was being turned into its opposite through the process of "Bolshevisation" (i.e. Stalinism) they put forward the idea that something more was needed. In the Communist Left's *Theses to the Lyons Congress* of the Communist Party of Italy they wrote;

Another aspect of the call for "Bolshevisation" is that complete centralisation of discipline and the strict prohibition of factions are considered the secure guarantee of the party's effectiveness. The final court of appeal for all controversial questions is the central international organ, within which at least political (if not hierarchical) hegemony, is attributed to the Russian Communist Party.

Actually this guarantee is non-existent, and the whole approach to the problem is inadequate. In fact, rather than preventing the spread of factions within the International, it has been encouraged to assume masked and hypocritical forms instead. From a historical point of view, the overcoming of factions in the Russian party wasn't an expedient, nor a magical recipe, applied on statutory grounds, but was both the result and the expression of a faithful delineation of the problems of doctrine and political action.

Disciplinary sanctions are one of the elements that ensure against degeneration, but only on condition that their application remains within the limits of exceptional cases, and doesn't become the norm and virtually the ideal of the party's functioning.

The solution doesn't reside in a useless increase in hierarchical authoritarianism, whose initial investiture is lacking both because of the incompleteness of the historical experiences in Russia, impressive though they are, and because even within the Old Guard, the custodian of

the Bolshevik traditions, disagreements have been resolved in ways which cannot be considered as a priori the best ones. But neither does the solution lie in the systematic application of the principles of formal democracy, which for marxism have no other function than as organisational practices which can be occasionally convenient.

The communist parties must achieve an organic centralism which, whilst including maximum possible consultation with the base, ensures a spontaneous elimination of any grouping which aims to differentiate itself. This cannot be achieved with, as Lenin put it, the formal and mechanical prescriptions of a hierarchy, but through correct revolutionary politics.⁵

This search for a new organisational formula is entirely understandable given the degeneration of both the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Comintern. Thus the Italian Left came up with the idea that something more than mere democratic centralism was needed to give new revolutionary life to the decaying bodies of the October Revolution. Since Stalin had stitched up the voting in the Russian Party and in most other parties "democratic" (which by this time was no longer any such thing) centralism just played into the hands of the executive bodies. The idea of "organic centralism" was supposed to ensure that there would be more discussion and more debate inside the Comintern and its parties.

However, the real problem was a historical one. The counter-revolution had brought the proletarian revolutionary wave of 1917-21 to a halt and the forces of conservatism had overtaken not only the capitalists but also a Comintern which had become the mere foreign office of the USSR. Needless to say the Theses of the Left were rejected by the Gramscian leadership (who managed to stitch up the vote by threatening to remove the income of the professional revolutionaries who made up part of the delegations – see footnote 2). The Left were then expelled from the Party they had founded.

The idea of organic centralism was thus buried for the next 25 years. It re-emerged in the post-war world only when the Bordigist current, formed inside the Internationalist Communist Party (the real historic heir of the Italian Left), revived it as part of the process of their split from the PCInt. However this revival of "organic centralism" was in a more authoritarian direction than the original thesis. This came out in the exchange

between Onorato Damen (principal founder of the PCInt) and Bordiga. Damen argued that "organic centralism" as defined by Bordiga was a recipe for dictatorship within the party. In fact Bordiga had taken the concept a stage further than the Lyons Theses (which called for voting or "formal democracy" when such things became necessary). Now Bordiga was arguing that the Party

pursues the aim of re-establishing an always wider contact with the exploited masses, and it eliminates from its structure one of the starting errors of the Moscow International, by getting rid of democratic centralism and of any voting mechanism, as well as every last member eliminating from his ideology any concession to democratoid, pacifist, autonomist or libertarian trends. [Our emphasis]

Damen does not totally reject the "organic" aspect of centralism but restates the case that although democratic centralism is not perfect it is the only healthy way in which the relationship between the membership of a world proletarian party and its elected leadership, "between freedom and authority", can be maintained. In other words, at some points when discussion does not arrive at a consensus, issues inevitably have to be settled by votes of the membership. Bordiga justified his rejection of democratic centralism on the grounds that it was only employed by the parties of the Third International because they were "impure" but as Damen pointed out no such "pure" communist parties will ever exist as even in the most advanced workers lurk all kinds of capitalist hangovers which will only be expunged under a different mode of production.

Lenin's International certainly had its weaknesses, due to the immaturity of the historical period that followed the collapse of the Second International and the crisis then afflicting the capitalist world. Every proletarian organisation reproduces, though in a more advanced way, and on an inversely proportional scale, the characteristics of the historical period in which it was formed. And it is certain that the negative aspects present in the Third International will be present, although differently articulated in future international organisations, as amply proved by the objective conditions in which the various Left Communist groupings, who today claim the right to make a contribution to the reconstruction of the international proletarian party, are operating. Amongst these groups, the one that suffers most from intolerance and crises is the Bordigist

*"Communist Programme" where the dynamics of democratic centralism work more deeply, as seen in the explosive cycle of its internal contradictions.*⁶

He also argued that this mechanism is essential within the party to ensure that its members are properly prepared for the revolutionary struggle. This advocacy of democratic centralism has nothing to do with Stalinism, which hid behind the term to maintain pure centralism with nothing democratic about it. As the quotation above shows, he argued that Bordiga's contempt for democracy within the party was not only closer to Stalinism but had already had serious consequences for his followers after the original split in 1952. The Bordigist current has split several times in its history (partly, as Damen maintains above, because of the consequences of attempting to maintain an artificial organic centralism), each split claiming to be the one true embodiment of the proletarian vanguard. Just as "there is no royal road to science", as Marx remarked in his introduction to *Capital*, so too there is no short cut to communism. Its establishment will only come once the proletariat has fully digested and understood the lessons of its previous struggles and defeats. In the meantime this leaves scope in its revolutionary vanguards for debate and discussion on the road to our emancipation as a class.

This is why it is not only important to agree that discussion and debate within the party are needed; it also has to be actively encouraged. Obviously this does not mean that there are no limits to discussion but at each stage in the historic struggle of the working class the lessons of its past fight prepare a series of parameters in which such a debate can take place. Within these parameters (whether enshrined in a platform or programme) the maximum degree of freedom has to be maintained in order that a real fighting organ of the working class can develop. Factions and tendencies (which will inevitably rise and fall in the course of the struggle against capitalism) have not merely to be tolerated but given full rights of debate. As Damen argued in the text already quoted it is

In this constant dialectical relationship between the membership and leadership of the party, in this necessary integration of freedom and authority, lies the solution to the problem ...

A party has to have a centralised unity in action to defeat the class enemy but a meaningful unity is not arrived at without



Onorato Damen
1893-1979

constant dialogue between its members. This is just one of the many lessons we have to take from the period of counter-revolution. The history of Bordigism demonstrates that, tragically, it has "learned nothing and forgotten nothing" as Napoleon once said of the Bourbon Monarchy.

Notes

1 See our pamphlet **1917**. A new history of revolution and counter-revolution in Russia is currently in preparation but the old pamphlet can be found online at <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2007-11-01/1917>

2 Local Party secretaries were paid by the Party. Gramsci informed them that they had to vote for the Comintern theses or lose their livelihoods. This is one reason why the Italian Left has always considered a party of professional revolutionaries which takes workers away from their comrades to be a dangerous development and only relevant in situations where clandestine activity is necessary). See the introduction to our pamphlet *Platform of the Committee of Intesa 1925* for more details.

3 For more on the real debate between Bordiga and Gramsci see Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings in *Internationalist Communist Review 13* (£3 from CWO address) or see <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2013-08-30/antonio-gramsci-pre-prison-writings-review-article>

4 For more on this see our pamphlet *1917* or read A. Rabinowitch *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* (New Left Books 1979)

5 These can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1926/lyonstheses.htm>.

6 For the full argument see Damen's *Centralised Party, Yes Centralism over the Party, No!* at <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2010-03-17/centralised-party-yes-centralism-over-the-party-no>

10

By Way of Conclusion: Towards World Proletarian Revolution

Introduction

An understanding of the nature of working class consciousness, the manner in which it arises and the way in which that consciousness becomes a material force in history, is the most important issue for defining the nature of revolutionary action. In this pamphlet we have tried to relate the theoretical acquisitions gained by revolutionaries to the practical, material, movement of the working class itself.

Whilst the very existence of the working class and its struggles in the early nineteenth century in Europe provided Marx and Engels with the raw material for the basic theory of how working class consciousness arises, *The German Ideology* and the *Communist Manifesto* were only the beginning of the definition of the question. "The word was made flesh" by the subsequent actions of the working class in the Paris Commune, in the mass strikes of 1905, and in the 1917 Russian Revolution itself. This is why it is not good enough to quote what Marx and Engels wrote in the past as though they were a set of commandments handed down by some deity. Whilst the basic method and framework of Marx and Engels remain eminently defensible even today, the problems which they raised have turned out to be infinitely more complex than the two great thinkers could possibly have anticipated. Although they had begun to sense that the Social Democratic Parties that claimed the title "Marxist" [see Chapter Four] were increasingly anti-revolutionary, they could not have remotely foreseen the extent to which Social Democracy, and the trades unions, would become a force for capitalist preservation.

And despite Engels insight in *Anti-Duhring* that

the transformation, either into joint-stock companies, or into state ownership, does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces¹,

neither of them could have anticipated the extent to which capitalist states at the heart of the system would respond to the threat of working class struggle by mitigating the worst aspects of exploitation through state intervention. Nor could anyone have predicted that the first attempt by the proletariat to launch an international revolution in 1917 would be isolated to a single geographical entity and that the party created by the proletariat in that revolution would be the same force that would carry out the counter-revolution.

As we demonstrated in Chapters Seven and Eight, this was overwhelmingly due to the material situation of isolation of the revolution. Counter-revolution did not occur overnight but was a gradual process which contemporaries were concerned about but they could not at the time foresee exactly how each expedient measure to hold the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic (RSFSR) together was actually one more nail in the coffin of international proletarian revolution. In the RSFSR itself the so-called civil war, which lasted three years following the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, decimated the revolutionary class. The most class conscious workers went into the Red Army, or the Party-cum-state apparatus, and the abandonment of the main cities by millions searching for survival, took the heart out of Soviet power. The Soviets became empty shells by 1920. Many Russian Communists tried to get round this by insisting that the dictatorship of the proletarian party was the same thing as the dictatorship of the proletariat but such a position undermines the revolutionary core of Marxism. Such illusions were the building bricks on which Stalinism would be constructed.

By way of conclusion to this pamphlet we would like to link the proletarian position on the question of consciousness (i.e. how the revolution can come about) to the consequences of the Russian Revolution and its aftermath in order to arrive at a workable and meaningful position for today.

The Revolutionary Position Re-Stated

Let's start with the problem posed by the decline of the revolution in Russia. Marx was always clear that the communist revolution, unlike all previous historical movements was the "self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority" [see Chapter Three]. At the same time Marx was also clear that this movement could only constitute itself as a class movement through a political party. For Marx this was axiomatic. The problem of class consciousness for the working class is that it has no property form to defend therefore, unlike the bourgeoisie, its class consciousness cannot arise automatically from the extension of its form of property.

The economic struggle of the working class poses the question of the nature of exploitation but does not of itself provide the answer to the question of how to end that exploitation. The fractured nature of the way in which different groups and individuals came to class consciousness at different

times means that only through the creation of some permanent political body can that consciousness be consolidated and spread. The political party of those workers who understand the historical nature of the class struggle – that it is more than just a struggle for a fair day's wage but for an entirely new way of life – is the only way in which the ruling ideas can be challenged. By putting together all “the sparks of consciousness” produced by the daily struggle against capitalist exploitation the party can make the ideas of the proletariat “a material force” in the political fight to overthrow the capitalist state. It cannot come spontaneously from the daily struggle of the class alone. What was less clear in Marx's time was what the nature of this party was to be, as well as what its relationship to the mass of the class was.

The experience of Social Democracy [including that of the Bolsheviks] showed that the proletarian party should be programmatically clear rather than numerically large in advance of the revolution. Whilst German Social Democracy became the largest political party of its epoch it did this at a cost. Although Rosa Luxemburg and others had carried on a struggle against reformists and revisionists like Bernstein (because as a former protégé of Engels he seemed more dangerous as an opponent of revolution), the German Social Democratic Party, and its trades unions, actually had much worse figures who were saturated with imperialist, racist and even downright pro-capitalist attitudes [see Chapter Four]. The SPD Right were to be the final murderers of Luxemburg even if the so-called “Marxists” like Kautsky had helped prepare the way by failing to carry out all the anti-war resolutions of the Second International. Indeed it was the very “narrowness” of the Bolsheviks (and it is no accident that their Bulgarian allies were called the Tesnyaki or Narrow Ones) which was to ensure that they maintained class positions (and even this was not without sharp ideological differences. Kamenev, for example, thought that the overthrow of the Tsar in March 1917 meant that the Bolsheviks could now support the war!).

Asserting that the proletarian party should be programmatically clear rather than numerically large on the eve of revolution obviously requires some explanation. If the proletarian revolution is the movement of the “immense majority” how can it be led by a minority? The answer obviously has to be a bit schematic since in real life historical processes never unfold as paradigmatically as the attempts we make to understand them. Broadly speaking the key to it lies in



Poland 1980

The form without the content. Mass assemblies controlled the struggle but the movement ultimately came to be dominated by Catholic reaction.

the word “process”.

Revolutions (and indeed all great social movements) always begin somewhere with a limited cast. Gradually more and more people are drawn into this process as the movement extends both geographically and politically. The first event of any revolution will be some spontaneous development, which flows from an economic and social crisis of capitalism. It is likely that it may not even be apparent to the participants that what they are launching is a revolution. All they will know is that they cannot go on living in the old way. The unconscious comes before the conscious. However whilst spontaneity can launch a movement, the key to a successful revolution is that the movement goes beyond mere anti-capitalism to acquire a programmatic alternative goal.

As we have argued throughout this pamphlet only those workers who have embraced an organised conscious alternative to capitalism are in a position to move the revolt on towards a new society. It cannot be otherwise. If there is no communist programme for the new movement to seize it will eventually take on some or other capitalist banner (as in Poland in the 1980s when the alternative to fighting Stalinism was the Catholic Church as there was no real communist party present, and there was the additional mystification that the system was already seen to be “communist”).

However we are not arguing that the revolutionary minority should be numerically insignificant when the revolutionary process begins, since in any given territory there has to be a “critical mass” of communists who can take part and influence a wider movement. A class party however does not bring this programme down from a Mount Olympus or a Mount Sinai. The members of the party are

part of the working class and have roots and connections throughout it which go beyond the actual party membership. At a certain (early) point in the movement they assume organisational tasks which help to lead the working class as a whole from existing capitalist organisational structures towards the revolutionary establishment of elected class-wide bodies which begin to replace the bourgeois state. It is within these class-wide bodies that the political debate and struggle for communism has to take place.

It is at this point that the movement assumes the character of a majority movement but it may not yet be a fully communist movement. As Marx explained, once workers are actually engaged in this new social and political activity they begin to experience the world differently.

Both for the production on a mass scale of this communist consciousness and for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of human beings on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration that can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution; this revolution is necessary therefore because the ruling class cannot be overthrown in any other way, but also because the class overthrowing it can only succeed in ridding itself of the muck of ages and become fitted to found society anew.

“The German Ideology”
[quoted in Chapter 2]

Parliamentarism Fragments Class Consciousness

This is the most important passage for explaining how we can get from a situation of ideological domination by the ruling class to an entirely new view of society. It gives the answer to all those who state that capitalist values are “human nature”. Our nature changes with our circumstances and our actions – not with the preaching of socialists or communists.

This latter error can be found in the tendency of the World Socialist Movement, represented by the Socialist Party (formerly the Socialist Party of Great Britain) in Britain. This organisation has existed since the early years of the last century, and has a clear Marxist conception of the communist mode of production (correctly criticising the state capitalist distortions of the statist, which include not only Stalinists and Maoists, but also the Trotskyists). However they share the same view as the bourgeoisie that the October Revolution was a coup of a tiny minority rather than part of a wider class movement. Instead, they argue that socialism

can only come about if workers vote for it via the rules of the bourgeois parliamentary system. As we have demonstrated this is not only unmarxist, but is also utopian, and it plays into the hands of capitalist ideologues.

The Socialist Party has existed for over a century and not achieved one parliamentary seat. This lack of success at the democratic game is grist to the mill of the capitalist class. Their record demonstrates that under the conditions of capitalist domination only a handful of people, in capitalist elections, will vote for anything other than immediate, and capitalist "solutions". This should not be surprising since, in the act of voting, workers are isolated from fellow workers in the polling booths, subject to the pressure of immediate daily problems and only asked to choose between two or three "real" candidates of various capitalist persuasions. It is no real choice. However every electoral failure by the Socialist Party, or any other electoral formation of the left in any country, only gives the capitalist ruling class the lie for use in propaganda that no-one wants socialism.

It is only under revolutionary conditions that this spell can be broken and a whole new mindset adopted. Instead of passively accepting the will of the bourgeois parliamentary leaders we now become active participants in the debates of the day. Immediate recall of delegates allows us to directly influence what is debated in the class-wide bodies. However, at this point in any revolutionary movement, the question of communism has only been posed, and perhaps only implicitly at that. Now it needs to be fought for in the debates in the class-wide bodies.

And here again the most active fighters for this new society are by any logic those who are already communist. Only by winning over a majority of the delegates in the main class bodies does the revolution become the movement of the immense majority.

The Russian Revolution: A Lesson not a Model

The Socialist Party and others have always thrown back at us the undeniable fact that the Russian Revolution failed and that any attempt to use any part of the revolution as an example to be followed will only lead to the same state capitalist tyranny. This issue cannot be brushed aside and we have tried to address it in the last few parts of this pamphlet. Let us summarise here. The Russian October Revolution is not a model. The next revolutionary wave will take place in

different circumstances and under different conditions than the last one. However, the October Revolution was the only time when the working class anywhere actually overthrew the existing political order. To simply state that this was a Bolshevik coup is not only untrue it also deals a blow to the whole idea that the working class is capable of making revolution succeed.

The Bolsheviks themselves resisted any voluntarist taking of power (as can be seen in the July Days when they tried to head off an armed demonstration by Kronstadt sailors who wanted to seize power straightaway). The Bolsheviks only actively discussed the overthrow of the Provisional Government once they had a majority in both the main two Soviets and in the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets. The whole world knew that the overthrow of the Provisional Government (which had never been elected but was simply a committee of the old Tsarist Duma) was going to take place and yet it passed off relatively peacefully because the Bolsheviks had such overwhelming support.

Nor did the Bolsheviks think that they could establish socialism in Russia alone but expressly stated that the October Revolution was the first step in a worldwide socialist revolution. This was not unreasonable (although the Socialist Party assert otherwise). The First World War had created an international wave of unrest which was only equalled in extent by the [largely bourgeois] revolutions of 1848. By 1917, there had been riots in Italy, strikes in Germany and Britain and mutinies in the French and British armies. And, in fact, revolution did break out in many European cities within a year of the Russian October. The Bolshevik Revolution inspired these revolts and, for some years after 1917 there was a real threat that the capitalist order would be faced by a greater challenge.

The Bolsheviks initially also extended soviet power throughout Russia after October, and, in its early days, the Executive Committee of the Soviets did act independently of the Party on several occasions. These are some of the positive points we take from that experience. However the failure of the Russian Revolution (which must be seen ultimately as the failure of the world revolution) to usher in a new era of proletarian emancipation has given us a whole new set of experiences upon which we must draw. Whilst the ultimate cause of the adoption of many polices which ran counter to socialism was the civil war and Allied intervention in Russia, we must also emphasise some lessons from that period.

The first is that the proletarian party is not only internationalist in outlook but internationally centralised in character [see "Towards the New International" in *Internationalist Communist* 19 or at <http://www.leftcom.org/en/articles/2000-10-01/towards-the-new-international>]. If the workers have no country, neither does their party. With the collapse of the Second International any pretensions that there was an international party before the First World War also vanished. Instead we were left with a series of national parties.

Thus when the Russian socialists (Bolsheviks) triumphed on the territory of the Tsarist Empire, then that party became inextricably bound up with the government of that area. To be in a government in an area of brutal international class war foisted on the Russian workers by international imperialism was hardly the best circumstance for developing socialist policies. Indeed, the opposite process took place, as the war demanded a restoration of a standing army (the Red Army absorbed the proletarian militia, the Red Guards), the use of former Tsarist officials in the bureaucracy and, as a response to the terror which the old order waged on the proletariat from the first days of October, the organisation of a secret police (the Cheka). If all of the latter had still been directly under the control of the soviets, this would not have been so serious but, as we have already mentioned above, the war also tore the revolutionary heart out of the soviets. By 1920 they were empty shells, as the Kronstadt Rebellion revealed in March 1921 [see Chapters Seven and Eight].

The Bolsheviks, as an isolated organisation in a hostile world, had no previous working class experience to turn to. Having become the government, they ended up by constructing a state apparatus which was not based on soviets and which was anti-working class. On the way, despite internal opposition from the likes of the Democratic Centralists, the RCP (B) erroneously decided that the party was the class and thus "the dictatorship of the proletariat" could be exercised through the party. They tried for a while to keep the party proletarian and communist by occasionally "purging" it of the careerists and opportunists who entered its ranks for their personal advancement after 1918 [it should be noted that this only meant expelling them from the party – not taking any form of punitive action against them. This was the meaning Stalin's massacres later gave to the word] but the consequence of the party becoming the state was to render such a move futile.

Only an international revolution could have reversed this course (as all the Bolsheviks originally accepted), but the adoption of "socialism in one country" signaled the end of even this faint hope. The Bolsheviks set up a new and communist Third International in 1919. Originally it was planned to be based in Germany, but the failure of the Spartakist Revolt in January 1919 meant that Moscow was the only place it could be based. This was another source of weakness for the international working class since the degeneration of the revolution inside the RSFSR meant the adoption of ever more desperate opportunist policies to try to safeguard the USSR (as the RSFSR became in 1923). In the process it was transformed into an agent for safeguarding Russian national capital, an arm of the Russian state.

The adoption of the "united front" with social democracy was not a brilliant tactic to link the communists to the masses but a transparent manoeuvre which only discredited the International in the eyes of workers. It ultimately strengthened a now openly capitalist Social Democratic movement. The more the Communist Party became the sole apparatus for running the USSR the more it ceased to be the vanguard of the international proletariat. It was the Italian Communist Left headed by Bordiga who, at the 6th Enlarged Executive Committee of the Comintern, openly asked Stalin why the Comintern did not discuss developments inside the USSR.²

Bordiga was underlining a real problem. The party has to be a world party with a centralised international leadership in advance of the next revolution. It is unlikely that the world revolution will be instantly successful everywhere at the same time. The Party's role is not to rule over nor administer any proletarian outpost but, because it is an international body, its entire work is to do with the extension of the revolution. Whilst party members will be in significant, if not dominant, positions in any positive move towards communism in the "soviets" they are responsible to the workers who delegate them (and they won't accept delegation except for a clear communist mandate). The task of administering any area belongs only to the class-wide organs. Party members in any given territory obviously take part in such work but the leading bodies of the party are international and do not identify with any state or semi-state.

The world party of the proletariat is an instrument of revolution, it is not equipped to be an instrument of government. This is part of the basic tenets of our organisation and

has been so since 1943. This was repeated in the 1952 Platform of the International Communist Party

There is no possibility of working class emancipation, nor of the construction of a new social order, if this does not emerge from the class struggle ...At no time and for no reason does the proletariat abandon its combative role. It does not delegate to others its historical mission, and it does not give power away to anyone, not even to its political party.
(pp. 5-6).

Trotskyist Twists and Turns

At such points in speculation about any future proletarian revolutionary process there enters a whole raft of "what if?" questions. Many of these are based on the premise that a successful proletarian movement will once again be isolated to a single area. The simple answer to all these is that, if a revolution is again isolated, it means that we are in for a further defeat. If the consciousness of the class is not there on a sufficiently wide (i.e. global) scale, it cannot be manufactured. This is one of the cardinal points which identify the Left Communist tradition. As our comrades in the Committee of Intesa in their 1925 Platform stated

It is a mistake to think that in every situation expedients and tactical manoeuvres can widen the Party base since relations between the party and the masses depend in large part on the objective situation.
op. cit. [CWO Pamphlet, 1995] p.18

The same holds true for the process of revolution. Either the mass of the class is drawn more and more into the process so that the revolution keeps moving forward to deny the imperialists the power base to regroup and destroy us, or we will find ourselves isolated to this or that area once again, and the capitalist order will survive once more (whilst plunging us into further misery and barbarism).

All this is in stark contrast to the Trotskyist tradition. We have already produced a pamphlet explaining how a highly gifted revolutionary could ultimately bequeath us a tendency which has spawned more and more manipulative organisations which actually take us back to the worst practices of nineteenth century Social Democracy.³ In brief, most of the errors of Trotskyism on class consciousness and organisation are based on the view that if class conscious activity is not there it can be manufactured on a voluntarist basis by a "revolutionary"

minority.

This stems from the degenerating Comintern which one week would be calling the Social Democrats "social fascists", whilst the next they would be seeking united fronts with their leaders. Trotsky's own aim to revive a kind of mass movement along the lines of the old Social Democracy of the Second International led to the entryism of its French section and, ultimately, most of the Fourth International. By hiding their revolutionary programme the Trotskyists hoped to be part of a wider movement. All they did was to fail in the basic task of defending as openly as possible the communist programme, at the same time as giving the impression to the wider world that all "revolutionaries" are dishonest.

Nor can Trotskyists stand back and criticise the Stalinist view that the Party (and not the class) is the vehicle of socialist transformation, since they not only shared this view in the 1920s, but even gave rise to some of its most absurd expressions. At one point in their debates, Stalin even lectured Trotsky, after the latter had said, "no-one can be right against the Party", that Lenin had always acknowledged that the Party would make mistakes! Trotsky's assumption that a mass party could be built in the 1930s led him to reject all the many other small communist organisations which existed in opposition to Stalinism in the 1930s (including our own political ancestors). He did not accept that, after a defeat of the magnitude of the 1920s, the road to rebuilding a class movement would be a long one, nor that the most important basis for a new proletarian organisation was a new programme which took into account both the negative and positive lessons of the Russian Revolution. Too much bound up with the creation of the state apparatus of the USSR in the Civil War, and early 1920s, this was a task he left to others. Today, the same failure to actually defend a communist programme is still to be seen in the Trotskyist movement, as the various groupings of this tendency hail every mass movement, however reformist or reactionary, as a model of the united front.

The Communist Left

The historical cul de sac of the Soviet Union has left us a bitter legacy. It hangs like a millstone around the neck of any revolutionary trying to frame the question of how society, and thus humanity, is to escape the exploitation and degradation of the capitalist system. There is an understandable, but mistaken, tendency on the part of those who want to see the

emancipation of the working class to throw the revolutionary baby out with the party bathwater. The way in which the Bolshevik Party first took upon itself the tasks which can only be carried out by the entire class, and then became the godfather to a new regime of administrated state capitalism, has made even the mere mention of the party a taboo for some. Many assume that those who see that only a minority of workers will become communist before the revolution are repeating the elitist mistakes of the past. This may be understandable given the depth of the defeat suffered after the Russian Revolution, but to deny the fact that the class moving towards revolution will produce a minority organisation robs us of one of the tools which are necessary (but not sufficient) condition for its emancipation.

It is time to go beyond the superficial and to recognise that the only vehicle for regrouping and organising the revolutionary sparks of consciousness produced under capitalist conditions is via some political body, i.e. a world party of the proletariat. There is no other possibility apart from the pious hopes of those who insist that spontaneity can settle everything.

History does not offer much comfort to spontaneists. Whilst every revolutionary movement begins with spontaneous acts these only pose the question of revolutionary transformation. The question is to what does the working class turn once it has embarked on the revolutionary road. In the famous Red Two Years in Italy (1919-20) the massive spontaneous struggles of the class failed to challenge the state, failed to generate socialist consciousness and instead, trapped in the ideology of self-management, were led to defeat. Unless there exists a material force which has a revolutionary programme based on the lessons of working class experience, the course of any spontaneous movement will always head back towards something safe for capitalism.

The Party, as the body of the most class conscious workers, helps to lead and organise the seizure of political power to establish a regime in which class-wide organisations can begin the process of revolutionary transformation. The members of the party will be actively involved in this (and in positions of leadership), but the party as a body can only remain a class vanguard by remaining outside of any territorial organs, and instead acting as the centralised international motor of world revolution. The Party is for making world revolution; it is not a state machine, not even in the proletarian semi-state.

At the present, talk of revolution seems to be far distant. Although the legacy of the counter-revolution that saved capitalism in the 1920s still dominates working class conscious, there have been moments when it might have been punctured. At the end of the Second World War, a massive strike wave in Northern Italy gave rise to our own comrades organisation, the Internationalist Communist Party (PCInt), which challenged all sides in the imperialist war. Other strikes in Britain and France at this time gave rise to some hope that new independent movements could develop. The PCInt became an organisation of thousands, with newspapers in many towns across Italy. However, the beginning of the post-war boom and the start of welfare measures in the victor states soon brought this wave of militancy to an end.

It was to revive in the period 1968-74 when the same post war boom came to an end and workers responded to the initial attempts of the capitalist class to make them pay for the crisis. For a time, this revitalised revolutionary politics within the working class, but by the end of the 70s this was also coming to an end. Currently (2018), the crisis of capitalism has created a new period of rising revolutionary awareness on a global level. However, this has not been on anything like the scale that some revolutionaries have expected. But then, consciousness is not a reflex reaction. As we have argued, it involves both material causes and reflection on those material circumstances. After more than forty years of capitalist stagnation, the capitalist class has globally succeeded, so far, in restructuring the workforce at the heart of the system, whilst at the same time creating island fortresses of high exploitation within the periphery (like the so-called maquiladoras in Latin America or Special Economic Zones in Asia). Such divisions within the class make it more difficult for it to reconstitute itself as a global revolutionary antagonist to the capitalist system.

But the class has been equally divided and consequently written off as a revolutionary class by so-called socialists before. From Bernstein in the 1890s to Cardan, Gorz and Marcuse in the 1960s, there have been no shortage of gravediggers of the working class as the subject of revolution. But the contradictions of capitalism and the class struggles they engender have always confounded their pessimism by launching new, potentially revolutionary onslaughts. However, for both careerists and opportunists, this wait is too long. They either personally abandon communist work entirely, or they join tendencies in

the Trotskyist tradition. As the latter have abandoned the defence of the revolutionary programme for spurious short-term numerical gains, they are the equivalent of modern-day Bernsteins for whom "the movement is everything and the goal nothing". As a result, they have brought discredit on the very notion of revolution inside the working class.

Only the tradition of the "Communist Left", the tradition to which we adhere, has consistently attempted to come to terms with our past defeats as a class to provide the long term programmatic basis for the revolutionary revival of the working class.

Currently, the fragmentation of the class is reflected in the dispersal of revolutionary energies. Some have been discouraged by the divisions amongst revolutionaries, but the road back to a revolutionary revival of the working class is a long one. This should not be seen as a negative factor, but as part of the process of the development of class consciousness. Along the way, important debates have been, are, and will doubtlessly continue to be necessary. Without sharp debate to clarify issues, the proletariat will never be in a position to have a solid programme on which to fight the next big onslaught on capitalism.

At the same time, the tenuous links between revolutionaries and the mass of the class have to be deepened and strengthened. The political organisation has to adopt means to maintain its contact with wider layers of workers who may not yet consider themselves revolutionary but do know that they want to fight capitalism. In the post-war boom, the strategy put forward by the Internationalist Communist Party was that of factory groups which included members of the party and non-members in several workplaces (including FIAT). However, with the decline of the huge factory concentrations of workers, these are no longer the only way for organising in the class, as they are not always appropriate. Instead, "territorial groups" regrouping workers across workplaces or fighting on other issues (e.g. war, housing and jobs) have been adopted. The key here is that the party must be more deeply rooted in the places where the mass of the class itself is present.

The party is not an entity which can be formed at the last minute, and it is not something that only turns up when a struggle takes place. It has to be part of the life of the class. At the present, this is very embryonic, but as the crisis deepens, as more workers come to realise that capitalist

solutions to their problems are not solutions for them, then the possibility to work more widely will present itself to revolutionaries. Once workers begin to move, then the practical movement will tend to take on board that programme which most meets its real needs. However, this does not mean that revolutionaries wait around with folded arms until the *great day*. There will be no *great day* unless those who are already communists fight for that perspective as widely as possible within the class.

The World Proletarian Party (or at least a large nucleus of it) has to be in existence in advance of the outbreak of the revolutionary crisis. By its very nature, that party has to be international as well as internationalist. It is "narrow" in the sense that its Platform and programme are based only on the revolutionary lessons of the class struggle so far. Within that framework, all debate is possible and the party is organised along democratic centralist lines (i.e. ultimately all issues are voted on by the members).

At the same time, the party will also allow for the existence of factions and tendencies which have the full right of debate and publication of minority opinion since there will be no linear road to revolution and there are still many issues which history has not yet answered for us. The health of the organisation depends on debate and exchange of opinions. Ultimately, this is also the only healthy way in which the party can develop if it is to act as a centralised force when required to by the situation of the world revolution. Without a shared understanding of the general lines of march (even if there is not totality of agreement,) no meaningful policy will be carried out.

Such discussion and debate also prepares each individual party member to act autonomously to act as a revolutionary should when required by the immediate local situation. There is no mechanism for ensuring this. It lies in the preparation and consciousness of individual members, and this can only come about through a political organisation which has an internal life based on education and discussion.

Although we have adopted these principles in our statutes, the Internationalist Communist Tendency, as we have repeated many times, is not the party, since the conditions for it do not yet exist⁴. However, we have raised the banner of the Party so that those new forces who do come to a consciousness of the need to overthrow the system have something to rally around. In this process we also hope to engage with those forces which already exist

to actively cooperate where possible and, ultimately, to unite as a real class movement develops. As we wrote in *Internationalist Communist* 23 (2006),

The party-class relationship is not an academic question. On the contrary the clarity and fundamental agreement on this fundamental of communist theory and practice is an indispensable precondition for the process of coming together of all revolutionary forces – something which we passionately desire.

Notes

1The full quote is;

But the transformation, either into joint-stock companies, or into state ownership, does not do away with the capitalistic nature of the productive forces. In the joint-stock companies this is obvious. And the modern state, again, is only the organisation that bourgeois society takes on in order to support the general external conditions of the capitalist mode of production against the encroachments as well of the workers as of individual capitalists.

The modern state, no matter what its form, is essentially a capitalist machine, the state of the capitalists, the ideal personification of the total national capital. The more it proceeds to the taking over of productive forces, the more does it actually become the national capitalist, the more citizens does it exploit. The workers remain wage-workers — proletarians. The capitalist relation is not done away with. It is rather brought to a head. But, brought to a head, it topples over. State ownership of the productive forces is not the solution of the conflict, but concealed within it are the technical conditions that form the elements of that solution.

See <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1877/anti-duhring/ch24.htm>

2 See *Bordiga's Last Fight in the Communist International* in *Internationalist Communist* 14

3 *Trotsky, Trotskyism, Trotskyists* [£2/€4/\$4] from the CWO address.

4 For the ICT's views on the emergence of the World Party see *Internationalist Communist* 19 and 20 as well as our more recent document *The Future International*.

Our Pamphlets

The Platform of the Internationalist Communist Tendency
70p (formerly the International Bureau for the
 Revolutionary Party)

For Communism £3

An Introduction to the Politics of the CWO

Class Consciousness and Revolutionary Organisation
£3

The issue of "consciousness" is one of the most important for the working class and for revolutionaries. Our approach is unashamedly historical and attempts to draw out the real experience of the working class in its struggles of the last two centuries. 56pp

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How Trotsky, who made such an enormous contribution to revolutionary practice, ended up giving his name to a movement which returned to the counter-revolutionary errors of Social Democracy.

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South Africa's New Turmoil £2

An analysis of class relations in the period after the fall of apartheid thrown into relief by the strike wave which followed the Marikana massacres.

About Us

The Communist Workers' Organisation is part of the Internationalist Communist Tendency which was inspired by the Internationalist Communist Party (Battaglia Comunista). Formed during the Second World War in 1943, the PCInt. condemned both sides as imperialist. Its roots go back to the Italian Communist Left which had fought the degeneration of the Communist International and the Stalinisation imposed on all its member parties. Today there are ICT affiliates in several countries.

We are internationalists. We believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism cannot be achieved in one country, a myth peddled by Stalinism. Stalinism was never communism but a particular form of capitalism, state capitalism. After 1917 the economic blockade of the Soviet Union and the failure of the world revolution in the West meant that the revolution was transformed into its opposite, eventually becoming an imperialist bloc that would collapse after only seventy years. We are opposed to all (Trotskyists, Maoists) claims that state capitalism in whatever form is socialism.

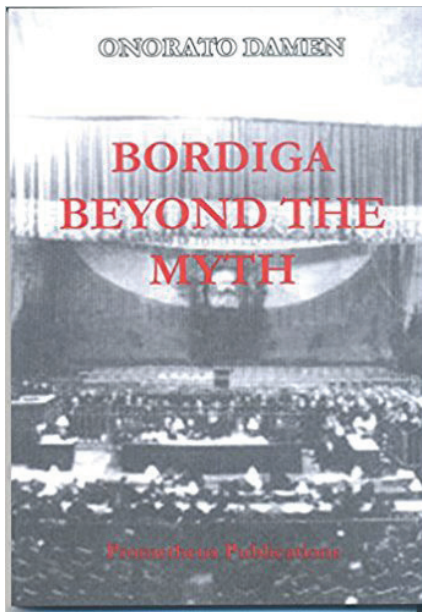
We aim to be a political reference point for the working class, first of all for those who are tired of the unions, all unions. This does not mean giving up on the fight to defend immediate interests (wages, hours, work rates, etc.). But the unions are now a tool to control the class struggle and manage the labour force on behalf of capital. Today, any 'self-organised struggle', has to go outside of and against the unions. However, rank and file unions are a blunt instrument for workers. Even when they win a particular battle if they settle into a permanent existence they must accept the legal and economic framework imposed by the state. Any attempt to maintain a permanent body to defend workers' immediate economic interests will fail.

The only permanent body the working class can establish today is the political organisation, which is not only possible but essential. The starting point for this must be recognising that the general interest of the class lies in getting rid of capitalism. This is only possible through a revolution, i.e. the overthrow of the existing state and establishment of a new form of political power by the proletariat. The road to revolution does not mean the futile attempt to win control of the existing state via elections to parliaments or local governments which are means for the capitalist class to exercise its rule. History has shown us that the forum of our "democracy", the bodies of power of the revolution, will be the workers' councils, (or soviets) – mass meetings in which delegates will be entrusted with specific mandates and will be recallable at any time. But these potentially revolutionary organisations will be undermined by capitalist forces from within if they do not have a clear programme aimed at the abolition of exploitation and, therefore, the elimination of classes, for a society of "freely associated producers" who work together to directly meet human needs.

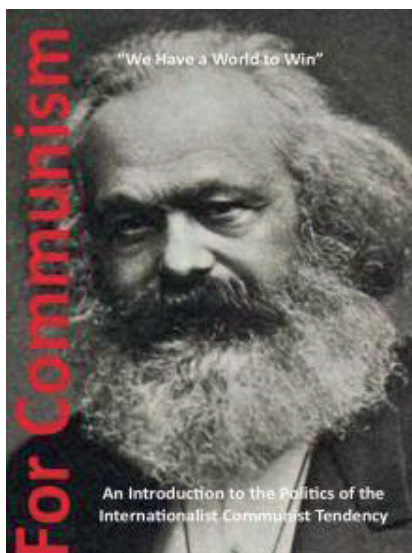
The programme is not the creation of any single theorist or one organisation. It is the outcome of the key lessons learned from past and present struggles and as such defines the practical way forward for the working class as a whole. Without a clear political compass the working class movement will be prey to all kinds of capitalist tricks and illusions. Thus political clarification and reorganisation today are vital for a revolutionary party to come into being which is in a position to win over the working class to the revolutionary programme. This is not a party of government that would replace the class and its class-wide organs of power, but a party of agitation and political guidance on the basis of that programme.

We are for the party, but we are not that party or its only embryo. Our task is to participate in its construction, trying to link immediate demands to the historical programme; communism.

Join us! Support the Internationalist Communist Tendency



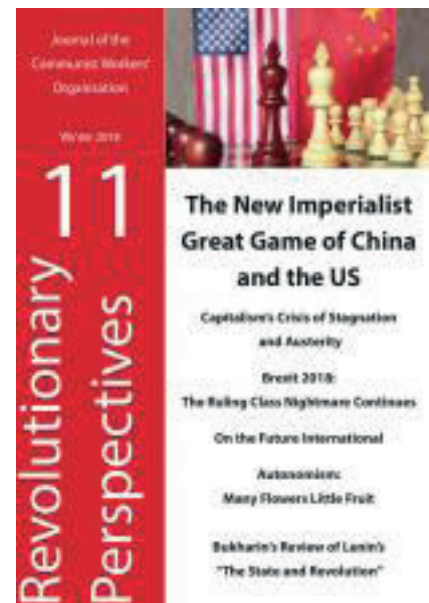
Bordiga Beyond the Myth by Onorato Damen is now available in English translation (it already exists in Italian, French and Spanish). It contains 168 pages and includes 114 footnotes to guide English readers plus 4 appendices, one of which is the first full translation in English of Bordiga's famous letter to Karl Korsch. The price of £7.25 includes postage and packaging in the UK.



For Communism - an introduction to the politics of the ICT.



Aurora is the broadsheet of the ICT for the interventions amongst the working class. It is published and distributed in several countries and languages. So far it has been distributed in UK, France, Italy, Canada, USA, Colombia.



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