

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article464>



Marxism

Bourgeois ideology and proletarian class consciousness

- Features - Ernest Mandel Archive - 1970: The Leninist Theory of Organisation -

Publication date: Tuesday 30 December 2003

Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved

The Marxian proposition that "the dominant ideology of every society is the ideology of the dominant class" appears at first glance to conflict with the character of the proletarian revolution as the *conscious* overturning of society by the proletariat, as a product of the conscious, independent activity of the wage-earning masses. A superficial interpretation of this proposition might lead to the conclusion that it is utopian to expect the masses who, under capitalism, are manipulated and exposed to the constant onslaught of bourgeois and petty-bourgeois ideas, to be capable of carrying out a revolutionary class struggle against this society, let alone a social revolution, Herbert Marcuse, who draws this conclusion, is (for the time being) simply the latest in a long series of theoreticians who, taking as their point of departure the Marxian definition of the ruling class, finish by calling into question the revolutionary potential of the working class.

The problem can be solved by replacing the formalistic and static point of view with a dialectical one. The Marxian proposition simply needs to be made more "dynamic". The dominant ideology of every society is the ideology of the dominant class in the sense that the latter has control over the means of ideological production which society has at its disposal (the church, schools, mass media, etc.) and uses these means in its own class interests. As long as class rule is on the upswing, stable and hence hardly questioned, the ideology of the dominant class will also dominate the consciousness of the oppressed class. Moreover, the exploited will, as a rule, tend to formulate the *first phases* of the class struggle in terms of the formulas, ideals and ideologies of the exploiters. [1]

However, the more the stability of the existing society is brought into question, and the more the class struggle intensifies, and the more the class rule of the exploiters itself begins to waver in practice, the more will at least sections of the oppressed class begin to free themselves of the control of the ideas of those in power. Prior to, and along with, the struggle for the social revolution, a struggle goes on between the ideology of the rulers and the new ideals of the revolutionary class. This struggle in turn intensifies and accelerates the concrete class struggle out of which it arose by lifting the revolutionary class to an awareness of its historical tasks and of the immediate goals of its struggle. Class consciousness on the part of the revolutionary class can therefore develop out of the class struggle in spite of and in opposition to the ideology of the ruling class. [2]

But it is only in the revolution itself that the majority of the oppressed can liberate themselves from the ideology of the ruling class. [3] For this control is exerted not only, nor even primarily, through purely ideological *manipulation* and the mass assimilation of the ruling class' ideological production, but above all through the actual day-to-day workings of the existing economy and society and their effect on the consciousness of the oppressed. (This is especially true in bourgeois society, although parallel phenomena can be seen in all class societies.)

In capitalist society this control is exerted through the internalisation of commodity relations, which is closely tied to the reification of human relations and which results from the generalised extension of commodity production and the transformation of labour power into a commodity, and from the generalised extension of the social division of labour under conditions of commodity production. It is also accomplished through the fatigue and brutalisation of the producers through exploitation and the alienated nature of labour, as well as through a lack of leisure time, not only in a quantitative but also in a qualitative sense, etc. Only when the workings of this imprisonment are blown apart by a revolution, i.e., by a sudden, intense increase, in *mass activity outside of the confines of alienated labour* - only then can the mystifying influence of this very imprisonment upon mass consciousness rapidly recede.

The Leninist theory of organisation therefore attempts to come to grips with the inner dialectic of this formation of political class consciousness, which can develop fully only during the revolution itself, yet only on the condition that it has already begun to develop before the revolution. [4] The theory does this by means of three operative categories:

the category of the working class in itself (the mass of workers); the category of that part of the working class that is already engaging in more than sporadic struggles and has already reached a first level of organisation (the proletarian vanguard in the broad sense of the word); [5] and the category of the revolutionary organisation, which consists of workers and intellectuals who participate in revolutionary activities and are at least partially educated in Marxism.

The category of "the class in itself" is linked to the objective class concept in the sociology of Marx, where a social layer is determined by its objective position in the process of production *independent* of its state of consciousness. (It is well known that the young Marx - in the *Communist Manifesto* and in his political writings of 1850-1852, for instance - had put forward a subjective concept of the class according to which the working class becomes a class only through its struggle, i.e., by reaching a minimum degree of class consciousness. Bukharin, in connection with a formula from *The Poverty of Philosophy*, calls this concept the concept of "the class for itself" as opposed to the concept of the "class in itself.") [6] This objective concept of the class remains fundamental for Lenin's ideas on organisation, as it did for Engels and the German Social Democracy under the influence of Engels, Bebel and Kautsky. [7]

It is only because there exists an objectively revolutionary class that can, and is periodically obliged to, conduct an actual revolutionary class struggle, and it is only in relation to such an actual class struggle, that the concept of a revolutionary vanguard party (including that of professional revolutionaries) has any scientific meaning at all, as Lenin himself explicitly observed. [8] All revolutionary activity not related to this class struggle leads at best to a party nucleus, but not to a party. This runs the risk of degenerating into sectarian, subjective dilettantism. According to Lenin's concept of organisation, there is no self-proclaimed vanguard. Rather, the vanguard must win recognition as a vanguard (i.e., the historical right to act as a vanguard) through its attempts to establish revolutionary ties with the advanced part of the class and its actual struggle.

The category of "advanced workers" stems from the objectively inevitable stratification of the working class. It is a function of their distinct historical origin, as well as their distinct position in the social process of production and their distinct class consciousness.

The formation of the working class as an objective category is itself an historical process. Some sections of the working class are the sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons of urban wage labourers; others are the sons and grandsons of agricultural labourers and landless peasants, Still others are only first or second generation descendants of a petty bourgeoisie that owned some means of production (peasants, artisans, etc.). Part of the working class works in large factories where both the economic and the social relations give rise to at least an elementary class consciousness (consciousness that "social questions" can be solved only through collective activity and organisation). Another part works in small or medium-sized factories in industry or in the so-called service sectors, where economic self-confidence as well as an understanding of the necessity for broad mass actions flow much less easily from the objective situation than in the large industrial plant. Some sections of the working class have been living in big cities for a long time. They have been literate for a long time and have several generations of trade-union organisation and political and cultural education behind them (through youth organisations, the workers press, labour education, etc.). Still others live in small towns or even in the countryside. (This was true into the late 1930s, for instance, for a significant number of European miners.) These workers have little or no collective social life, scarcely any trade-union experience, and have received no political or cultural education at all in the organised workers movement. Some sectors of the working class are born from nations which were independent for a thousand years, and whose ruling class oppressed for long periods other nations. Other workers are born from nations which fought for decades or centuries for their national freedom - or who lived in slavery or serfdom no more than one hundred years ago. If one adds to all these historical and structural differences the various personal abilities of each wage worker - not just differences in intelligence and ability to generalise from immediate experiences, but differences in the amount of energy, strength of character: combatively and self-assurance too - then one understands that the stratification of the working class into various layers, depending on the degree of class consciousness, is an inevitable phenomenon in the history of the working class itself. *It is this historical process of*

becoming a class which, at a given point in time, is reflected in the various degrees of consciousness within the class

.

The category of the revolutionary party stems from the fact that Marxian socialism is a science which, in the final analysis, can be completely assimilated only in an individual and not in a collective manner. Marxism constitutes the culmination (and in part also the dissolution) of at least three classical social sciences: classical German philosophy, classical political economy, and classical French political science (French socialism and historiography). Its assimilation presupposes at least an understanding of the materialist dialectic, historical materialism, Marxian economic theory and the critical history of modern revolutions and of the modern labour movement. Such an assimilation is necessary if it is to be able to function, in its totality, as an instrument for analysing social reality and as the compilation of the experiences of a century of proletarian class struggle. The notion that this colossal sum of knowledge and information could somehow spontaneously flow from working at a lathe or a calculating machine is absurd. [9]

The fact that as a science Marxism is an expression of the highest degree in the development of proletarian class consciousness means simply that it is only through an individual process of selection that the best, most experienced, the most intelligent and the most combative members of the proletariat are able to directly and independently acquire this class consciousness in its most potent form. To the extent that this acquisition is an individual one, it also becomes accessible to other social classes and layers (above all, the revolutionary intelligentsia and the students). [10] Any other approach can lead only to an idealisation of the working class - and ultimately of capitalism itself.

Of course it must always be remembered that Marxism could not arise independently of the actual development of bourgeois society and of the class struggle that was inevitably unfolding within it. There is an inextricable tie between the collective, historical experience of the working class in struggle and its scientific working out of Marxism as collective, historical class consciousness in its most potent form. But to maintain that scientific socialism is an historical product of the proletarian class struggle is not to say that all or even most members of this class can, with greater or lesser ease, reproduce this knowledge. Marxism is not an automatic product of the class struggle and class experience but a result of scientific, theoretical production. Such an assimilation is made possible only through participation in that process of production; and this process is by definition an *individual* one, even though it is only made possible through the development social forces of production and class contradictions under capitalism.

[Next section](#)

[1] Thus the rising bourgeois class consciousness, and even the rising plebian or semi-proletarian class consciousness in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were expressed within a completely religious framework, finding the way to overt materialism only with the full-blown decadence of the feudal absolutist order in the second half of the eighteenth century.

[2] Gramsci's "concept of political and ethical hegemony," which an oppressed social class must establish within society before it can take political power, expresses this possibility especially well. Cf *Il Materialismo Storico e la Filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Milan: Einaudi, 1964), p.236; and also *Note sul Machiavelli* (Milan: Einaudi, 1964). Pp.29-37, 41-50 ff. This hegemony concept has been criticised or modified by numerous Marxist theoreticians. See, for example, Nicos Poulantzas, *Pouvoir politique et classes sociales* (Paris: Maspero, 1968), pp.210-222. Concerning the significance of overall social consensus with the material and moral foundations of bourgeois class rule, see Jose Ramon Recalde, *Integracion y lucha de clases en el neo-capitalismo* (Madrid: Editorial Ciencia Nueva, 1968), pp.152-157.

[3] This is expressed by Marx and Engels in the proposition in *The German Ideology* that "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." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968), p.87. Cf. also the following observation by Marx in 1850 against the Schapper minority in the Communist League: "The minority substitutes a dogmatic approach for a critical one, and idealism for materialism. For it, the driving force of the revolution is mere will power, not actual conditions. We, on the other hand, tell the workers: 'You will have to go through 15, 20, 50 years of civil wars and people's struggles not only to change the conditions, *but in order to change yourselves* so you will be capable of exercising political rule.' You, on the contrary, say: 'If we can't take power right away we might as well go to bed.'" Karl Marx, *Enthüllungen Ueber den Kommunistenprozess zu Koln* (Berlin: Buchhandlung Vorwartz, 1914). Pp.52-53.

[4] Note Lenin: "Our wiseacre fails to see that it is precisely during the revolution that we shall stand in need of the results of our [prerevolutionary-E. M.] theoretical battles with the Critics in order to be able resolutely to combat their *practical* positions!" *What is to Be Done?* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p.163. How tragically this came true seventeen years later in the German revolution.

[5] In this connection in *What is to Be Done?* Lenin speaks of the "social-democratic" and "revolutionary" workers in contrast to the "backward" workers.

[6] N. Bukharin, *Theorie des Historischen Materialismus* (published by the Communist International: 1922), pp.343-345.

"Economic conditions had first transformed the mass of the people of the country into workers. The combination of capital has created for this mass a common situation, common interests. This mass is thus 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." Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963). p.173.

[7] Cf. the section of the SPD's "Erfurt Program" that was not criticised by Engels, in which the proletarians are described as simply the class of waged workers separated from the means of production and condemned to sell their labor power, and in which the class struggle is described as the objective struggle between exploiters and exploited in modern society (i.e., without relation to the degree of organisation or consciousness of the wage earners). Following this objective fact, which is established in the first four sections, comes the following addition to the conclusion of the general body of the program:

"The task of the social-democratic party is to mould this struggle of the working class into a conscious and homogeneous one and to point out what is by nature its essential goal." This once again explicitly confirms that there can be classes and class struggle in capitalist society without the struggling working class being conscious of its class interests. Further on, in the eighth section, the program speaks of the "class-conscious workers of all countries," and Engels proposes a change which again underlines the fact that he made a definitive distinction between the "objective" and the "subjective" concept of class: "Instead of 'class conscious,' which for us is an easily understandable abbreviation, I would say (in the interests of general understanding and translation into foreign languages) 'workers permeated with the consciousness of their class situation,' or something like that." Engels, "Zur Kritik des sozialdemokratischen Programmwerfs 1891" in Marx- Engels, *Werke*, Band 22 (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag. 1963), p.232.

[8] Lenin: "The basic prerequisite for this success [in consolidating the party - E.M.] was, of course, the fact that the working class, whose elite has built the Social Democracy, differs, for objective economic reasons, from all other classes in capitalist society in its capacity for organisation. Without this prerequisite, the organisation of professional revolutionaries would only be a game, an adventure, . . ." Lenine, *Oeuvres Completes*, Tome 12 (Paris: Editions Sociales, 1969), p.74.

[9] To counter this view, many critics of the Leninist concept of organisation (beginning with Plekhanov's article, "Centralism or Bonapartism" in *Iskra*, No, 70 [Summer, 1904]), refer to a passage in *The Holy Family* - The passage states: "When socialist writers ascribe this historic role to the proletariat, it is not, as Critical Criticism pretends to think, because they consider the proletarians as *gods*. Rather the contrary. Since the abstraction of all humanity, even of the *semblance* of humanity, is practically complete in the full-grown proletariat; since the conditions of life of the proletariat sum up all the conditions of life of society today in all their inhuman acuity; since man has lost himself in the proletariat, yet at the same time has not only gained theoretical consciousness of that loss, but through urgent, no longer disguisable, absolutely imperative *need* - that practical expression of *necessity* - is driven to revolt against that inhumanity; it follows that the proletariat can and must free itself. But it cannot free itself without abolishing the conditions of its own life. It cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing *all* the inhuman conditions of life of society today which are summed up in its own situation. 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. Its aim and historical action is irrevocably and obviously demonstrated

Bourgeois ideology and proletarian class consciousness

in its own life situation as well as in the whole organisation of burgeons society today. There is no need to dwell here upon the fact that a large part of the English and French proletariat is already *conscious* of its historic task and is constantly working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity." Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: *The Holy Family* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956). pp.52-53.

Aside from the fact that Marx and Engels were hardly in a position in 1844-1845 to produce a mature theory of proletarian class consciousness and proletarian organisation (to become aware of this, one need only compare the last sentence of the above quotation with what Engels wrote forty years later about the English working class), these lines say the very opposite of what Plekhanov reads into them. They say only that the social *situation* of the proletariat prepares it for radical, revolutionary action, and that the determination of the general socialist objective (the abolition of private property) is "pre scribed" by its conditions of life. In no way do they indicate, however, that the proletariat's "inhuman conditions of life" will somehow mysteriously enable it to "spontaneously" assimilate all the social sciences. Quite the opposite! (Concerning Plekhanov's article, see Samuel H. Baron's *Plekhanov* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1963], pp.248-253.)

[10] Today it is almost forgotten that the Russian socialist movement too was founded largely by students and intellectuals, and that around three-fourths of a century ago they were faced with a problem similar to that of the revolutionary intelligentsia today. Similar, but of course not identical: Today there is an additional obstacle (the reformist, revisionist mass organisations of the working class), as well as an additional strength (historical experience, including the experience of great victory which the revolutionary movement has accumulated since then).

In *What is to Be Done?* Lenin speaks explicitly of the capacity of intellectuals to assimilate "political knowledge," i.e., scientific Marxism.