

<https://internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article472>



Marxism

Historical pedagogy and communication of 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

Once it is understood that the Leninist theory of organisation tries to answer the problems of the current potential for revolution and of the revolutionary subject, this theory then leads directly to the question of historical pedagogy, i.e., the problem of *transforming* potential class consciousness into actual class consciousness, and trade-unionist consciousness into political, revolutionary consciousness. This problem can only be resolved in the light of the classification of the working class delineated as above - into the mass of the workers, advanced workers, and organised revolutionary cadre.

To assimilate its growing class consciousness, each layer requires its own methods of instruction, goes through its own learning process and needs to have a special form of communication with the class as a whole and with the realm of theoretical production. The historical role of the revolutionary vanguard party Lenin had in mind can be summed up as that of jointly expressing these three forms of pedagogy,

The broad masses learn only through action. To hope to "impart" to them revolutionary consciousness through propaganda is an endeavour worthy of Sisyphus - and as fruitless. Yet although the masses learn only through action, all actions do not necessarily lead to a mass acquisition of *revolutionary* class consciousness. Actions around immediately realisable economic and political goals that can be completely achieved within the framework of the capitalist social order do not produce revolutionary class consciousness. This was one of the great illusions of the "optimistic" Social Democrats at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (including Engels) who believed that there was a straight line leading from partial successes in electoral struggles and strikes to revolutionary consciousness and to an increase in the proletariat's revolutionary combativity. [1]

This has proven to be historically incorrect. These partial successes certainly played a significant and positive role in strengthening the self-confidence and combativity of the proletarian masses in general. (The anarchists were wrong to reject these partial struggles out of hand.) Yet they did not prepare the working masses for revolutionary struggle. The German working class' lack of experience in revolutionary struggles on the one hand, and the existence, on the other hand, of such experience in the Russian working class, was the most important difference in consciousness between the two classes on the eve of the first world war. It decisively contributed to the dissimilar outcome of the revolutions of 1917-1919 in Germany and in Russia.

Since the goal of mass actions is generally the satisfaction of immediate needs, it becomes an important aspect of revolutionary strategy to link to these needs demands that objectively cannot be achieved or co-opted within the framework of the capitalist social order, and which produce an objectively revolutionary dynamic that has to lead to a test of strength between the two decisive social classes over the question of power. This is the strategy of transitional demands which, through the efforts of Lenin, was incorporated into the program of the Communist International at its fourth congress, and which was later elaborated by Trotsky into the main body of the program of the Fourth International. [2]

The development of revolutionary class consciousness among the broad masses is possible only if they accumulate experiences of *struggles* that are not only limited to the winning of partial demands within the framework of capitalism. The gradual injection of these demands into mass struggles can come about only through the efforts of a broad layer of advanced workers who are closely linked to the masses and who disseminate and publicise these demands (which normally do not spontaneously grow out of the day-to-day experiences of the class) in the factories, experimenting with them in various skirmishes, and spreading them through agitation, until a point is reached where favourable objective and subjective conditions converge, making the realisation of these demands the actual objective of great strikes, demonstrations, agitational campaigns, etc.

Although revolutionary class consciousness among the broad masses develops only out of the experience of *objectively revolutionary struggle*, among advanced workers it flows from the experience of life, work and struggle in general. These experiences do not necessarily need to be revolutionary at all. From the daily experiences of class conflict, these advanced workers draw the elementary conclusions about the need for class solidarity, class action and class organisation. The programmatic and organisational forms through which this action and organisation are to be led will differ greatly depending upon objective conditions and concrete experiences. But the advanced workers' experience of life, work and struggle leads them to the threshold of understanding the inadequacy of activity which seeks merely to reform the existing society rather than abolish it.

The activity of the revolutionary vanguard can make it possible for the class consciousness of the advanced workers to cross over this threshold. It can fulfil this role of catalyst neither automatically nor without regard for objective conditions. It can only fulfil it when it is itself equal to the task, i.e., if the content of its theoretical, propagandistic and literary activity corresponds to the needs of the advanced workers, and if the form of this activity does not trample underfoot the laws of pedagogy (avoiding ultimatic formulations). At the same time, this kind of activity must be linked to *activity of a practical nature* and to a *political perspective*, thus enhancing the credibility of both the revolutionary strategy and the organisation putting it forward.

In periods of abating class struggles, of a temporary decline in the self-confidence of the working class, during which the stability of the class enemy appears temporarily assured, the revolutionary vanguard will not be able to achieve its objective even if its activity is completely equal to the task of catalysing revolutionary class consciousness among the broadest layer of advanced workers. The belief that a mere defence of "the correct tactic" or "the correct line" is sufficient to miraculously generate a growing revolutionary force, even in periods of declining class struggle, is an illusion stemming from bourgeois rationalism, not from the materialist dialectic. This illusion, incidentally, is the cause of most splits within the revolutionary movement because the organisational sectarianism of the splitters is based on the naive view that the "application of the correct tactic" can win over more people in the as yet untouched periphery than it can among revolutionaries who are already organised. As long as the objective conditions remain unfavourable, these splits for that reason usually result in grouplets that are even weaker than those whose "false tactics" made them seem so worthy of condemnation in the first place.

This does not mean, however, that the work of the revolutionary vanguard among the advanced workers remains useless or ineffectual during unfavourable objective circumstances. It produces no great *immediate* successes, yet it is a tremendously important, and even decisive, *preparation* for that turning point when class struggles once again begin to mount!

For just as broad masses with no experience of revolutionary struggle cannot develop revolutionary class consciousness, advanced workers who have never heard of transitional demands cannot introduce them into the next wave of class struggle. The patient, persistent preparation carried out, with constant attention to detail, by the revolutionary vanguard organisation, sometimes over a period of years, pays off in rich dividends the day the "natural leaders of the class" still hesitating and not yet completely free from hostile influences, suddenly, during a big strike or demonstration, take up the demand for workers control and thrust it to the forefront of the struggle. [3]

To be in a position, however, to convince a country's advanced workers and radical intelligentsia of the need to extend broad mass struggles beyond the level of immediate demands to that of transitional demands, it is not enough for the revolutionary vanguard organisation to learn by heart a list of such demands culled from Lenin and Trotsky. It must acquire a twofold knowledge and a two-sided method of learning. On the one hand, it must assimilate the body of the experiences of the international proletariat over more than a century of revolutionary class struggle. On the other hand, it must carry on a continuous, serious analysis of the present overall social reality, national as well as international. This alone makes it possible to apply the lessons of history to the reality at hand. It is clear that on the basis of the Marxist theory of knowledge, only practice can ultimately provide the criterion for measuring the actual theoretical assimilation of present-day reality. For that reason, international practice is an absolute prerequisite for a

Marxist international analysis, and an international organisation is an absolute prerequisite for such a practice.

Without a serious assimilation of the entire historical experience of the international workers movement from the revolution of 1848 to the present, it is impossible to determine with scientific precision either the contradictions of present neocapitalist society - on a world scale as well as in individual countries - or the concrete contradiction accompanying the formation of proletarian class consciousness, or the kind of struggles that could lead to a prerevolutionary situation. History is the only laboratory for the social sciences. Without assimilating the lessons of history, a pseudo-revolutionary Marxist today would be no better than a "medical student" who refused to set foot inside the dissecting laboratory.

It should be pointed out in this connection that all attempts to keep the newly emerging revolutionary movement "aloof from the splits of the past" demonstrate a complete failure to understand the socio-political nature of this differentiation within the international workers movement. If one puts aside the inevitable personal and incidental factors involved in these differentiations, one has to come to the conclusion that the great disputes in the international workers movement since the foundation of the First International (the disputes between Marxism and anarchism; between Marxism and revisionism; between Bolshevism and Menshevism; between internationalism and social-patriotism; between defenders of the dictatorship of the proletariat and defenders of bourgeois democracy; between Trotskyism and Stalinism; between Maoism and Khrushchevism) touch upon fundamental questions relating to the proletarian revolution and to the strategy and tactics of revolutionary class struggle. *These basic questions are products of the very nature of capitalism, the proletariat and revolutionary struggle.* They will therefore remain pressing questions as long as the problem of creating a classless society on a world scale has not been solved in practical terms. No "tactfulness," no matter how artful, and no "conciliationism," no matter how magnanimous, can in the long run prevent these questions from rising out of practice itself to confront each new generation of revolutionaries. All that is accomplished by attempting to avoid a discussion of these problems is that instead of raising, analysing and solving them in a methodical and scientific fashion, this is done unsystematically, at random, without plan, and without sufficient training and knowledge.

However, while the assimilation of the historical substance of Marxist theory is necessary, it is nevertheless in and of itself an insufficient prerequisite for conveying revolutionary class consciousness to the advanced workers and the radical intelligentsia. In addition, a systematic analysis of the present is required without which theory cannot furnish the means for disclosing either the immediate capacity of the working class for struggle or the "weak links" in the neocapitalist mode of production and bourgeois society; nor can it furnish the means for formulating the appropriate transitional demands (as well as the proper pedagogical approach to raising them). Only the combination of a serious, complete social and critical analysis of the present and the assimilation of the lessons of the history of the workers movement can create an effective instrument for the theoretical accomplishment of the task of a revolutionary vanguard. [\[4\]](#)

Without the experience of revolutionary struggle by broad masses, there can be no revolutionary class consciousness among these masses. Without the conscious intervention of advanced workers, who inject transitional demands into workers struggles, there can hardly be experiences of revolutionary struggle on the part of the broad masses. Without the spreading of transitional demands by a revolutionary vanguard, there can be no possibility of advanced workers influencing mass struggles, in a truly anti-capitalist sense. Without a revolutionary program, without a thorough study of the history of the revolutionary workers movement, without an application of this study to the present, and without practical proof of the ability of the revolutionary vanguard to successfully play a leading role in at least a few sectors and situations, there can be no possibility of convincing the advanced workers of the need for the revolutionary organisation and therefore no possibility (or only an unlikely one) that the appropriate transitional demands for the objective situation can be worked out by the advanced workers. In this way the various factors in the formation of class consciousness intertwine and underpin the timeliness of the Leninist conception of organisation.

The process of building a revolutionary party acquires its unified character through jointly expressing the learning of

the masses in action, the learning of the advanced workers in practical experience, and the learning of the revolutionary cadre in the transmission of revolutionary theory and practice. There is a constant interrelationship between learning and teaching, even among the revolutionary cadre, who have to achieve the ability to shed any arrogance resulting from their theoretical knowledge. *This ability proceeds from the understanding that theory proves its right to exist only through its connection to the real class struggle and by its capacity to transform potentially revolutionary class consciousness into the actual revolutionary class consciousness of broad layers of workers.* The famous observation by Marx that the educators must themselves be educated [5] means exactly what it says. It does not mean that a consciously revolutionary transformation of society is possible without a revolutionary pedagogy. And it is given a more complete expression in the Marxist proposition that "In revolutionary activity the changing of oneself coincides with the changing of circumstances." [6]

[1] The sole difficulty for the revolution seemed to them to lie in a necessary reaction to any possible repeal of universal suffrage, as might happen in case of war. In contrast, Luxemburg had, in dealing with the question of the mass strike, undertaken a conscious attempt to develop the proletariat's forms of struggle by going beyond electoral and wage struggles and closely following the example of the Russian revolution of 1905.

Even today, Lelio Basso, in an interesting analysis of *Rosa Luxemburgs Dialektik der Revolution* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1969), pp.82-83, attempts to present as the quintessence of Luxemburg's strategy a centrist reconciliation between day-to-day struggles and ultimate objectives which is limited to "sharpening the contradictions" of objective development. The fact that the deeper meaning of the mass strike strategy escapes him as a result of this error does not need to be dwelt on here in detail.

[2] See the discussion of program at the fourth congress of the Communist International (*Protokoll des Vierten Kongresses der Kommunistischen Internationale* [published by the Communist International, 1923], pp.404-448). It provisionally concluded with the following declaration of the Russian delegation, signed by Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek and Bukharin: "The dispute over how the transitional demands should be formulated and in which section of the program they should be included has awakened a completely erroneous impression that there exists a principled difference. In light of this, the Russian delegation unanimously confirms that the drawing up of transitional slogans in the programs of the national sections and their general formulation and theoretical motivation in the general section of the program cannot be interpreted as opportunism." (*Ibid.*, p.542.) Trotsky seemed to foresee such a strategy already in 1904 when he wrote: "The party stands on the proletariat's given lack of consciousness ... and attempts to implant itself in the proletariat by raising this level ..." (*Nos taches politiques*, op. cit., p.126.)

[3] Georg Lukacs (*Lenine*, [Paris: E.D.I., 1965], p.57) is completely correct when he concludes from similar considerations that the Leninist revolutionary party cannot "make" a revolution, but can accelerate the tendencies that will lead to one. Such a party is both producer and product of the revolution - which amounts to a resolution of the antithetical positions of Kautsky ("The new party must prepare the way for the revolution") and Luxemburg ("The new party will be created by the revolutionary action of the masses").

[4] Hans-Jurgen Krahl (op. cit., p.13 ff) is quite correct when he reproaches Lukacs for his "idealising" concept of the totality of proletarian class consciousness, and when he accuses him of an inability to combine empirical knowledge and abstract theory - itself based on an inability to transmit revolutionary theory to the working masses. He should have been able to conclude from our essay, however, that such a transmission can be completely achieved on the basis of the Leninist concept of organisation - that it, in fact, lies at the very heart of this concept. Since he makes a sharp distinction between "alienated lot in life" and alienated process of production, however, he is predisposed by the Marcusean tendency to see the "alienation of the consumer" as the central problem, and as a result to regard the "civilised satisfaction of needs," which the neocapitalist system ostensibly makes possible for the working class, as an obstacle on its way toward acquiring proletarian class consciousness. Yet the Achilles heel of the capitalist mode of production must more than ever be sought in the sphere of alienation in the production process; there alone can a truly revolutionary rebellion begin, as the events in France and Italy have demonstrated. With that we are brought back to the process, which we described, of formulating and conveying class consciousness. In describing it we, like Krahl (and, we are convinced, like Lenin and Trotsky), in no way substitute the naive concept of the "omniscient party" for that of the evolution of revolutionary theory as a *specific and permanent ongoing process of production*.

[5] Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach." third thesis: "The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educators themselves." (Marx-Engels, *The German Ideology*, op. cit., p.660.)

[6] *Ibid.*, p.234.