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Marxism

Organisational theory, revolutionary program, revolutionary practice

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

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After the traumatic shock suffered by Lenin on August 4, 1914, however, he too made a decisive step forward on this question. From then on, the question of organisation became one not only of function but also of content.

It is no longer simply a question of contrasting "the organisation" in general to "spontaneity" in general, as Lenin frequently does in *What is to Be Done?* and in *One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward*. Now it is a question of carefully distinguishing between an objectively conservative organisation and an objectively revolutionary one. This distinction is made according to *objective* criteria (revolutionary program, bringing this program to the masses, revolutionary practice, etc.), and the spontaneous combativity of the masses is consciously preferred to the actions or even the existence of conservative reformist mass organisations. "Naïve" organisational fetishists might claim that after 1914 Lenin went over to the Luxemburgist view of "spontaneism" when, in conflicts between "unorganised masses" and the social-democratic organisation, he systematically defends the former against the latter, or accuses the latter of betraying the former. [1] Lenin now even regards the destruction of conservatised organisations as an inescapable prerequisite for the emancipation of the proletariat. [2]

Yet the correction, or better yet completion, of his theory of organisation, which Lenin undertook after 1914 was not a step backward to the worship of "pure" spontaneity, but rather a step forward toward distinguishing between the *revolutionary* party and organisation in general. Now, instead of saying that the purpose of the party is to develop the political class consciousness of the working class, the formula becomes much more precise: The function of the revolutionary vanguard consists in developing *revolutionary consciousness* in the vanguard of the working class. The building of the revolutionary class party is the process whereby the program of the socialist revolution is fused with the experience the majority of the advanced workers have acquired in struggle. [3]

This elaboration and expansion of the Leninist theory of organisation following the outbreak of the first world war goes hand in hand with an expansion of the Leninist concept of the relevance of revolution to the present. Although before the year 1914 this was for Lenin limited by and large to Russia, after 1914 it was extended to all of Europe. (After the Russian revolution of 1905 Lenin had already recognised the immediate potential for revolutions in the colonies and semi-colonies.) Consequently, the validity of the Leninist "strategic plan" for the imperialist countries of Western Europe today is closely tied to the question of the nature of the historical epoch in which we live. From the standpoint of historical materialism, one is justified in deriving a conception of the party from the "present potential for revolution" only if one proceeds from the assumption - correct and probable, in our estimation - that beginning with the first world war, and no later than the Russian October revolution, the world-wide capitalist system entered an epoch of historic structural crisis [4] which *must* periodically lead to revolutionary situations. If, on the other hand, one assumes that we are still in an ascending stage of capitalism as a world system, then such a conception would have to be rejected as being completely "voluntaristic." For what is decisive in the Leninist strategic plan is certainly not revolutionary *propaganda* - which, of course, revolutionaries have to carry out even in nonrevolutionary periods - but its focus on revolutionary actions breaking out in the near or not distant future. Even in the ascending epoch of capitalism such actions were possible (cf. the Paris Commune), but only as unsuccessful exceptions. Under such conditions, building a party by concentrating efforts on preparing to effectively participate in such actions would hardly make sense.

The difference between a "workers party" in general (referring to its membership or even its electoral supporters) and a revolutionary workers party (or the nucleus of such a party) is to be found not only in program or objective social functions (which is to promote, not pacify, all objectively revolutionary mass actions, or all challenges and forms of action that attack and call into question the essence of the capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois state), but also in its ability to find a suitable pedagogical method enabling it to bring this program to ever-growing numbers of

workers.

One can go further, however, and formulate the question more sharply: Is the danger of the apparatus becoming autonomous limited only to opportunist and reformist "workers" organisations, or does it threaten *any* organisation, including one with a revolutionary program and a revolutionary practice? Is not a developing bureaucracy the *unavoidable* consequence of any division of labour, including that between "leadership" and "membership," and even in a revolutionary group? And is not, therefore, every revolutionary organisation, once it has spread beyond a small milieu, condemned at a certain point in its development and in the development of mass struggles to become a brake on the struggle of the proletarian masses for emancipation?

If this line of argument were accepted as correct, it could lead to only one conclusion: that the socialist emancipation of the working class and of humanity is impossible - because the supposedly inevitable "autonomisation" and degeneration of any organisation must be seen as *one part of a dilemma*, the other part of which is represented by the tendency for all unorganised workers, all intellectuals only partially involved in action, and all persons caught up in universal commodity production to sink into a petty-bourgeois "false consciousness." Only a comprehensive, revolutionary practice, aiming at total consciousness and enriching theory, makes it possible to avoid the penetration of the "ideology of the ruling class" into even the ranks of individual revolutionaries. This can only be a collective and organised practice. If the above argument were correct, one would have to conclude that, with or without an organisation, advanced workers would be condemned either not to reach political class consciousness or to rapidly lose it.

In reality, this line of argument is false since it equates the beginning of a process with its end result. Thus, from the existence of a *danger* that even revolutionary organisations will become autonomous, it deduces, in a static and fatalistic fashion, that this autonomy is *inevitable*. This is neither empirically nor theoretically demonstrable. For the extent of the danger of bureaucratic degeneration of a revolutionary vanguard organisation - and even more of a revolutionary party - depends not only on the *tendency* toward autonomy, which in fact afflicts all institutions in bourgeois society, but also upon existing *counter-tendencies*. Among these are the integration of the revolutionary organisation into an international movement which is independent of "national" organisations and which constantly keeps a theoretical eye on them (not through an apparatus but through political criticism); a close involvement in the actual class struggle and actual revolutionary struggles that make possible a continuous selection of cadres in practice; a systematic attempt to do away with the division of labour by ensuring a continuous rotation of personnel between factory, university and full-time party functionaries; institutional guarantees (limitations on the income of full-timers, defence of the organisational norms of internal democracy and the freedom to form tendencies and factions, etc.).

The outcome of these contradictory tendencies depends on *the struggle between them*, which, in turn, is ultimately determined by *two social factors*: [5] on the one hand, the degree of *special social interest* set loose by the "autonomous organisation," and on the other hand, the extent of the political activity of the vanguard of the working class. Only when the latter decisively diminishes can the former decisively break out into the open. Thus, the entire argument amounts to a tedious tautology: During a period of *increasing passivity* the working class cannot be actively struggling for its liberation. It does not at all prove that during a period of *increasing activity* on the part of advanced workers, revolutionary organisations are not an effective instrument for bringing about liberation, though their "arbitrariness" can and must be circumscribed by the independent activity of the class (or of its advanced sections). The revolutionary organisation is an instrument for making revolutions. And, without the increasing political activity of broad masses of workers, proletarian revolutions are simply not possible.

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[1] Lenin, "Der Zusammenbruch der II Internationale" in Lenin and Zinoviev, *Gegen den Strom* (published by the Communist International, 1921), p.164.

[2] *Ibid.*, p.165.

[3] Lenin, "Left Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder" in *Collects Works*, Vol.31 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1966). Pp.17-118.

See also the above-mentioned passage from the pamphlet *What Does the Spartacus League Want?*, written by Rosa Luxemburg.

This conclusion was, superior to that of Trotsky in 1906 or Luxemburg in 1904. In the face of a growing conservatism on the part of the social-democratic apparatus, they had illusions about the ability of the masses to solve the problem of the seizure of power with the aid of their revolutionary ardour alone. In "The Mass Strike, the Political Party and the Trade Unions," (in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks*, op. cit., pp.153-219) Luxemburg even shifts the problem temporarily onto the "unorganised," i.e., the poorest, section of the proletariat that for the first time attains consciousness during a mass strike. In his writings after 1914 Lenin too explicitly contrasts these masses to the "labour aristocracy," in a somewhat oversimplified manner, in my opinion. At that time the workers in the large steel and metal processing plants, among others, belonged to the unorganised sectors of the German proletariat, and while they turned to the left en masse after 1918, they did not at all belong to the "poorest" layers.

[4] This so-called general crisis of capitalism, i.e., the onset of the historical epoch of the decline of capitalism, should not be confused with conjunctural crises, i.e., periodic economic crises. These have occurred during the period of rising, as well as declining, capitalism. For Lenin, the epoch beginning with the first world war is the "era of beginning social revolution." See, among others, *Gegen den Strom*, op. cit., p.393.

[5] Herein undoubtedly lies the greatest weakness of this fatalistic theory. Out of the tendency toward growing autonomy, it automatically deduces a *social danger*, without including in its analysis the transmission of potential social power and specific social interests. The tendency for doormen and cashiers to develop their own interests does not give them power over banks and large firms - except for the "power" of robbery, which is effective only under very specific conditions. If the analysis of this tendency toward autonomy is to have any social content, therefore, it must be accompanied by a definition of these conditions.