

EDUCATION FOR SOCIALISTS

# **2 THE LENINIST PARTY**

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# WHY DO WE NEED A REVOLUTIONARY PARTY?

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## **Uneven consciousness in the working class**

WHY DO we need a revolutionary party? The basic reason is in two statements Marx made. He stated that “the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class” and at the same time he said that “the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class”.

There is a contradiction between these two statements. But the contradiction is not in Marx’s head. It exists in reality. If only one of the statements was correct, there would not be a need for a revolutionary party. If the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class, and that is all, then, to be honest, we need do nothing about fighting for socialism—let’s sit with folded arms and smile. The workers will emancipate themselves!

If, on the other hand, “the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class”, and that is all, workers will always accept the ideas of the rulers. Then we can sit with folded arms and cry because nothing can be done.

The reality is that the two statements are correct. The class struggle always expresses itself, not just in a conflict between workers and capitalists, but inside the working class itself. On the picket line it is

not true that workers are there to try and prevent the capitalist from working. The capitalists never worked in their lives so they will not work during a strike. What the picket line is about is one group of workers trying to prevent another group of workers from crossing the picket line in the interests of the employers.

The question of workers' power involves what Marx called the dictatorship of the proletariat. Why would you need a dictatorship of the proletariat if the whole working class is united and there are only a tiny minority of capitalists in opposition? You could say go home, and we'd finish with the bosses. If the whole working class is united we could spit at them and flood them into the Atlantic!

The reality is that there will be workers on one side and backward workers on the other side. Because "the prevailing ideas of every society are the ideas of the ruling class", the workers are split between different levels of consciousness.

Not only this. The same worker can have split consciousness in his head. He or she can be a good wages militant, can hate the boss, but when it comes to black people it's a different story.

I remember we lived with a chap, a printer, in the same house, a very skilled man. He was going on holiday and I asked, "Are you flying tomorrow?" He said, "No, I can't fly tomorrow. It's Friday the 13th. We'll have to wait till Saturday." This man in the 20th century has some ideas from 1,000 years ago.

### **Against opportunism and against sectarianism**

You can stand on a picket line and next to you is a worker who makes racist comments. You can do one of three things. You can say, "I'm not standing with him on a picket line. I'm going home because there no one makes racist comments." That is sectarianism because if "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class" I have to stand with him on a picket line.

The other possibility is simply avoiding the question. Someone makes a racist comment and you pretend you haven't heard and you say, "The weather is quite nice today!" That's opportunism.

The third position is that you argue with this person against racism, against the prevailing ideas of the ruling class. You argue and

argue. If you convince him, excellent. But if you don't, still when the scab lorry comes you link arms to stop the scabs because "the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class".

## The university of the working class

The bourgeoisie didn't have a revolutionary party 20 years before their revolution. The Jacobins in France didn't exist before 1789.

Why do we have to start 20, 30 or 50 years before the revolution? We have to start to talk about the need for a revolutionary party to lead the working class in struggle, in revolution.

The Jacobins were established during the act of the revolution itself. Why? Because when you look to the relations between the capitalists and the nobility, it is different from the relationship between the capitalists and the working class.

It is true that the capitalists had to overthrow the nobility and the working class has to overthrow the capitalists, but there is a big difference. It is not true the nobility owned all the wealth and the capitalists were paupers. The capitalists were rich even before the revolution. They could turn around to the nobility and say, "All right, you own the land; we own money, we own the banks. When you go bankrupt how do you save yourself? You mix your blue blood with my gold, you try to marry my daughter." When it came to ideas they could say, "All right, you have priests, we have professors. You have the Bible—we have the Encyclopaedia. Come on, move over."

The capitalists were independent intellectually from the ideas of the nobility. They influenced the nobility much more than the other way around.

The French Revolution started with a meeting of *les États généraux* (the Three Estates)—the nobility, the priesthood and the middle classes. When it came to the vote it was the nobility and the priesthood who voted with the capitalists, not the other way around.

Is our position similar? Of course not. We cannot turn to the capitalists and say, "All right, you own Ford, General Motors, ICI, we own a pair of shoes." In terms of ideas I don't know how many capitalists are influenced by *Socialist Worker*. Millions of workers are influenced by the *Sun*!

The revolutionary party of the bourgeoisie could appear during the very act of the revolution. They didn't have to prepare; they were confident. What happened on 14 July 1789? Robespierre, leader of the Jacobins, suggested they build a statue to Louis XVI on the site of the Bastille. He didn't know that three years on he'd cut off the head of Louis XVI. Where does the name Jacobins come from? It came from the monastery where they met. If they had known that four years later they were going to expropriate the church lands they wouldn't have named themselves after a monastery.

They were independent, they were strong and they could deal with the issues. We have a completely different situation. We belong to an oppressed class that lacks the experience of running society, because capitalists don't only own the material means of production but the mental means of production. Because of that we need a party—the party is the university of the working class. What Sandhurst is to the British Army, the revolutionary party is to the working class.

Marx says in the *Communist Manifesto* that communists generalise from the historical and international experience of the working class. In other words, you don't learn from just what you experience. My own experience is tiny. Any one of us has fantastically little experience. You need to generalise and to do that you need an organisation that does it. I can't myself know about the Paris Commune. I wasn't there. I was very young in 1871! So you have to have someone who gives you the information.

Trotsky therefore wrote that the revolutionary party is the memory of the working class.

### **Three types of workers' parties**

There are three types of workers' parties: revolutionary, reformist and centrist. The *Communist Manifesto* described the nature of the revolutionary party in these words:

The communists are distinguished from the other working class parties by this only: (1) In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat,

independently of all nationality. (2) In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.

The communists, therefore, are, on the one hand, practically, the most advanced and resolute section of the working class parties of every country, that section which pushes forward all others; on the other hand, theoretically, they have over the great mass of the proletariat the advantage of clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.

The second type of workers' parties are the reformist parties. In a speech to the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920 Lenin defined the Labour Party as a "capitalist workers' party".

He called it capitalist because the politics of the Labour Party do not break with capitalism. Why did he call it a workers' party? It is not because the workers voted for it. At that time more workers voted for the Conservative Party; and the Conservative Party is of course a capitalist party. Lenin called the Labour Party a workers' party because it expressed the urge of workers to defend themselves against capitalism. When one watches the Labour Party conference on television, it is clear that the members of the Labour Party express different urges than the Tory party. At the Tory party conference the applause comes when speakers attack trade unionists and blacks, and praise the army, police, etc. In the Labour Party conference the applause comes when a speaker declares the need for a better health service, better education, housing, etc.

Between the revolutionary parties and reformist parties there is a third kind of party, the centrist parties. Their main characteristic is fudge. They are neither one nor the other. They vacillate between the two. A horse produces horses, a donkey donkeys. When a horse and a donkey mate they produce a mule. A mule does not produce anything; it is sterile. With a revolutionary party there is historical continuity. It can go up or down, but it continues. With a reformist party

there is historical continuity. But not with the centrists. In 1936 the Proum party in Spain had 40,000 members. Now the Proum is dead as a dodo. The Independent Labour Party in Britain had four MPs from the 1945 general election. Now there is not even a remnant of the ILP. A similar story attaches to the SAP in Germany, which was a mixture of people who came from the right, Brandlerite, wing of the KPD (German Communist Party), pacifist elements of the SPD and others from a mixed bag. It was quite a large party in the early 1930s. Now there is no sign of it.

### **Teaching and learning from the class**

The revolutionary party has to lead the working class based on all the experience of the past. OK, so the party teaches the workers, but then arises the simple question: “Who teaches the teacher?” It is extremely important to understand that we can be taught by the working class. All the great ideas come from the workers themselves.

If you read Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* he speaks about the need for a workers’ government, the dictatorship of the proletariat. Then in 1871 he writes that the workers cannot take hold of the old state machine; they have to smash it—the old standing army, the bureaucracy, the police. We have to smash all this hierarchical structure and establish a new kind of state—a state without a standing army or a bureaucracy, where every official is elected, where every official gets the same rate of pay as the average worker. Did he find this out because he worked so hard in the British Museum? No, no. What happened was that the workers of Paris had taken power and that’s exactly what they did.

Marx learnt from them. The Stalinists always claim that Lenin invented the idea of the soviet. Of course in the Stalinist literature Lenin invented everything! They had a concept of religious hierarchy. We have the correspondence of Lenin, and when workers established the first soviet in Petrograd in 1905, Lenin wrote four days later—what the hell is that for?

In the struggle the workers needed a new form of organisation. They learnt the hard way that if they had a strike committee in one factory it was not effective in a time of revolution. You need a strike

committee which covers all the factories. And that's what the soviet was: delegates from all the factories meeting together to run the show. They did it. Lenin followed them. The party has always to learn from the class, always.

Is the party always in advance of the class? The answer is that by and large the revolutionary party is in advance of the class. Otherwise it is not a revolutionary party. So when it came to 1914 and the outbreak of the First World War, the Bolsheviki were far in advance of the class. The Bolsheviki were against the war while the majority of the workers supported it.

Then comes 1917. In 1917 you find Lenin says again and again in August and September that the party is lagging behind the class, the class is more advanced than the party and we have to run quickly to catch up with the class. The reason is a simple one. For such a long time the workers had lacked confidence so they were behind the revolutionary party. Comes a change in the situation and they change very, very speedily.

The problem with revolutionaries is that we need a routine to survive. But the routine enters into you. You take it for granted that you are in advance of the working class. But when the workers start moving you find you are so bloody backward! The revolutionary party has to catch up with the working class. The party is not just a group of people. They are the revolutionaries and from now on they are always leading. That's rubbish. You have to fight and fight to lead all the time. You have to learn all the time, to advance all the time.

This is not just in time of revolution. You will find in the workplace that someone can be in the SWP for 20 years, a good comrade, and there's someone completely new, who joined a few months ago, and when it comes to activity the new comrade is far more advanced than the comrade who joined 20 years ago. You find this again and again.

You don't win the leadership like you have money in the bank. If you have money in the bank it gains interest. A revolutionary leadership is nothing like this. You have to win the leadership every day, every month. So for revolutionaries what counts is what they did last week, what they're doing this week and what they're doing next week. You can learn from all the experience of 100 years but

the important thing is what you're doing this week. You have to fight for leadership.

### **Reformist parties: passive and accommodating**

Because the reformist party wants to get the maximum vote, it looks to the lowest common denominator. It adapts itself to the prevailing ideas. Do you really believe that none of the Labour MPs know about the oppression of gays and lesbians? But still during the elections of 1987 Patricia Hewitt, [Labour leader] Neil Kinnock's secretary, leaked to the *Sun* (of all papers) an attack on the "loony left" in the councils which support gays and lesbians. Why did she do it? Because she thought that was the way to become popular.

I have a leaflet from a man called John Strachey. He called himself a Marxist. In the 1929 election he stood for parliament and he had a problem—he looked Jewish. So he issued a leaflet with the heading "John Strachey is British" and challenged anyone who said he was Jewish to go to court. Why did he say it? I have to say I'm a Jew, but if any member of the SWP is called a Jew they'd say, "Of course I'm a Jew. I'm proud of it." You don't deny it.

But if you want the maximum numbers you have to adapt to the prevailing ideas. The reformist parties are therefore large parties but extremely passive. For example, there is a book called *Labour's Grassroots* where the age composition is given. In 1984 there were 573 branches of the Labour Party Young Socialists, in 1990 only 15. There were three times more members aged 66 and above than aged 25 and below. Labour Party members were asked how much time they devoted to Labour activities in the month: 50 percent said none, 30 percent said up to five hours a month, an hour a week, and only 10 percent said between five and ten hours.

Extreme passivity—that is the nature of the Labour Party. The other side of the same coin is bureaucratic control. The bureaucrats dominate the party.

Then there is the sect. Its members say quite simply, "We want to march only with people who agree with us. We care only about people who agree with us."

The revolutionaries are those who are separate from the majority of the working class but at the same time are part of the working class. The question for revolutionaries is how to relate to non-revolutionary workers. How you relate to people who agree with you 60 percent and how, through the struggle, you can move that to 80 percent. If you are a sectarian you say, “You don’t agree with me on 40 percent, I don’t care about you.” If you are a revolutionary you say, “We agree on 60 percent, let’s start with that and I’ll argue with you about the 40 percent that we don’t agree and in the struggle try to convince you.”

### **Democratic centralism**

What about the structure of the revolutionary party? Why do we speak about democratic centralism?

Let us first understand why we need democracy. If you want to go from London to Birmingham you need a bus and a driver. You don’t need democratic discussion because we’ve done it before so we need one good driver and one good bus. The problem is that the transition from capitalism to socialism is something we’ve never experienced before. We don’t know.

If you don’t know, there’s only one way to learn—by being rooted in the class and learning from the class. It is not simply that on everything democracy solves the problem. If you want to know if there’s a decline in the rate of profit, if Marx is right, don’t put it to the vote! It doesn’t mean anything. Either he’s right or he’s wrong. Think about it, read about it and decide.

There are things you must put to the vote. Everything that is connected to our struggle must be put to the test. Because we simply don’t know. Because if “the emancipation of the working class is the act of the working class”, the working class through their own experiences will teach us.

There is a beautiful description Lenin gives of when he was in hiding after the July Days in 1917 when the Bolshevik Party became illegal and its press was smashed. The Bolsheviks were accused of being German agents. Lenin did not know how far the power of reaction had been consolidated. He describes eating with a worker

he was hiding with and the worker gave him bread and said, “The bread is good. They, the capitalist class, are frightened of us.”

Lenin says, “The moment I heard him I understood about the class relation of forces. I understood what workers really think—that the capitalists are still frightened of us, although we are illegal, although we are beaten. Still it is not a victory of counter-revolution.”

If you want to know if the workers are confident how do you know? You can’t have a ballot in the press, they don’t give you the opportunity. You can’t meet every individual.

You cannot make a working class revolution without a deep democracy. And what the revolution is about is raising the working class to become the ruling class, about creating the most democratic system in history. Unlike under capitalism, where every five years you elect someone to misrepresent you, here it is a completely different story. Under capitalism you elect the MPs but not the employers. Under capitalism we don’t vote on whether to close a factory. We don’t elect the army officers or the judges. In a workers’ government everything is under workers’ control. Everything is in workers’ power. It is the most extreme form of democracy.

So if all this is true, why do we need centralism?

First, the experience is uneven, workers have different experiences; you have to collect that experience together. Even in the revolutionary party the members are influenced by different pressures. They are influenced by the general picture and by the section of the workers to which they belong.

To overcome this sectionalism, this narrow experience, you need to centralise all the experience and division. Again you need the centralism because the ruling class is highly centralised. If you are not symmetrical to your enemy you can never win.

I was never a pacifist. If someone uses a stick on me I have to have a bigger stick! I don’t believe a quotation from Marx’s *Capital* will stop a mad dog attacking me. We have to be symmetrical to our enemies. That is why I cannot understand the anarchists when they come and say they don’t need a state. The capitalists have a state. How do you smash a state without an opposition state?

Anarchists always deny the state. When they had enough strength they joined the government. That's what they did in Spain during the civil war when they joined the government. Why? Because there is no good denying something unless you smash it and if you smash it you have to replace it. What do you have to replace it with? Armed bodies of workers. And that's what the workers' state is.

### **A mass revolutionary party**

When we speak of the party leading the class it is not just a question of experience, knowledge and roots. The leadership must use the language of workers, have the spirit of workers. You have to relate to them because that's what leadership is about, You talk and listen, you don't only talk. You talk in language they understand.

But that's not enough. We need a big party. To lead the working class you need a mass party. The SWP is the smallest mass party in the world. It is a tiny party. The Bolshevik Party in 1914 had 4,000 members. After the February 1917 revolution they had 23,000 members. In August 1917 they had a quarter of a million. With a quarter of a million you can lead an industrial working class of three million.

The German Communist Party in 1918 had 4,000 members. Even if they were all geniuses they could not have won the revolution. You need a sizeable party because in order to lead you need to have a base in every factory.

I mentioned the July Days. When Lenin was accused of being a German spy 10,000 workers out of 30,000 at the Putilov factory struck for the day saying they trusted Lenin. Why? Because they had 500 Bolsheviks in Putilov factory.

If you want to lead millions you need hundreds of thousands in the party. Even the Anti Nazi League Carnival, 150,000-strong, a marvellous achievement, in terms of the revolution was still a small thing. Even for this, we needed six, seven or eight thousand SWP members to organise it.

I detest it when people think Marxism is some sort of intellectual exercise: we interpret things, we understand, we are more clever. Marxism is about action and for action you need size. For action you need power. We need a mass party—of half a million.

# PARTY AND CLASS

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CHRIS HARMAN

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FEW QUESTIONS have produced more bitterness in Marxist circles than that of the relation between the party and the class.<sup>1</sup> More heat has probably been generated in acrimonious disputes over this subject than any other. In generation after generation the same epithets are thrown about—“bureaucrat”, “substitutionist”, “elitist”, “autocrat”.

Yet the principles underlying such debate have usually been confused. It will be the contention of this article that most of the discussion even in revolutionary circles is, as a consequence, discussion for or against basically Stalinist or social democratic conceptions of organisation. It will be held that the sort of organisational views developed implicitly in the writings and actions of Lenin are radically different to both these conceptions. This has been obscured by the Stalinist debasement of the theory and practice of the October Revolution and the fact that the development of the Bolshevik Party took place under conditions of illegality and was often argued for in the language of orthodox social democracy.

## **The social democratic view**

The classical theories of social democracy—which were not fundamentally challenged by any of the Marxists before 1914—of necessity gave the party a central role in the development towards socialism. For this development was seen essentially as being through a continuous and smooth growth of working class organisation and

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1: This article has been edited for space and accessibility. The full version is available online, see the further reading section below—*editor's note*.

consciousness under capitalism. Even those Marxists, such as Kautsky, who rejected the idea that there could be a gradual transition to socialism accepted that what was needed for the present was continually to extend organisational strength and electoral following. The growth of the party was essential so as to ensure that when the transition to socialism inevitably came, whether through elections or through defensive violence by the working class, the party capable of taking over and forming the basis of the new state (or the old one refurbished) would exist.

The development of a mass working class party is seen as being an inevitable corollary of the tendencies of capitalist development. “Forever greater grows the number of proletarians, more gigantic the army of superfluous labourers, and sharper the opposition between exploiters and exploited”, crises “naturally occur on an increasing scale”, “the intervals of prosperity become ever shorter; the length of the crises ever longer”. This drives greater numbers of workers “into instinctive opposition to the existing order”. Social democracy, basing itself upon “independent scientific investigation by bourgeois thinkers”, exists to raise the workers to the level where they have a “clear insight into social laws”. “Revolutions are not made at will... They come with inevitable necessity.”

The central mechanisms involved in this development is that of parliamentary elections (although even Kautsky played with the idea of the general strike in the period immediately after 1905-6). “We have no reason to believe that armed insurrection...will play a central role nowadays.” Rather, “it [parliament] is the most powerful lever that can be used to raise the proletariat out of its economic, social and moral degradation”. The uses of this by the working class makes “parliamentarianism begin to change its character. It ceases to be a mere tool in the hands of the bourgeoisie”.<sup>2</sup> In the long run such activities must lead to the organisation of the working class and to a situation where the socialist party has the majority and will form the government.

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2: Karl Kautsky, *The Erfurt Programme* (Chicago, 1910), *The Road to Power* (Chicago, 1910).

Not only did this perspective lay the basis for most socialist action throughout western Europe in the 40 years prior to the First World War, it also went virtually unchallenged theoretically, at least from the left. Lenin's astonishment at the German SPD's support for the war is well known. Not so often understood, however, is the fact that even left critics of Kautsky, such as Rosa Luxemburg, had not rejected the foundations of the theory of the relation of the party to the class and of the development of class consciousness implied. Their criticisms of Kautskyism tended to remain within the overall theoretical ground provided by Kautskyism.

What is central for the social democrat is that the party represents the class. Outside of the party the worker has no consciousness. Indeed, Kautsky himself seemed to have an almost pathological fear of what the workers would do without the party and of the associated dangers of a "premature" revolution. Thus it had to be the party that takes power. Other forms of working class organisation and activity could help, but must be subordinated to the bearer of political consciousness. "This 'direct action' of the unions can operate effectively only as an auxiliary and reinforcement to and not as a substitute for parliamentary action."

### **The revolutionary left**

No sense can be made of any of the discussions that took place in relation to questions of organisation of the party prior to 1917 without understanding that this social democratic view of the relation of party and class was nowhere explicitly challenged (except among the anarchists who rejected any notion of a party). Its assumptions were shared even by those, such as Rosa Luxemburg, who opposed orthodox social democracy from the point of view of mass working class self-activity. This was not a merely theoretical failing. It followed from the historical situation. The 1871 Paris Commune was the only experience then of working class power, and that had been for a mere two months in a predominantly petty bourgeois city.

Even the 1905 Russian Revolution gave only the most embryonic expression of how a workers' state would in fact be organised. The fundamental forms of workers' power—the soviets, the workers'

councils—were not recognised. Thus Trotsky, who had been president of the Petrograd Soviet in 1905, does not mention them in his analysis of the lessons of 1905, *Results and Prospects*. Virtually alone in foreseeing the socialist content of the Russian Revolution, Trotsky did not begin to see the form this would take: “Revolution is first and foremost a question of power—not of the state form (constituent assembly, republic, united states) but of the social content of the government”.<sup>3</sup> There was a similar omission in Rosa Luxemburg’s response to 1905, *The Mass Strike*. Not until the February 1917 revolution did the soviet become central in Lenin’s writings and thoughts.

The revolutionary left never fully accepted Kautsky’s position of seeing the party as the direct forerunner of the workers’ state. Luxemburg’s writings, for instance, recognise the conservatism of the party and the need for the masses to go beyond and outside it from a very early stage. But there is never an explicit rejection of the official social democratic position. Yet without the theoretical clarification of the relationship between the party and the class there could be no possibility of clarity over the question of the necessary internal organisation of the party. Without a rejection of the social democratic model, there could not be the beginnings of a real discussion about revolutionary organisation.

This is most clearly the case with Rosa Luxemburg. It would be wrong to fall into the trap (carefully laid by both Stalinist and would-be followers of Luxemburg) of ascribing to her a theory of “spontaneity” that ignores the need for a party. Throughout her writings there is stress upon the need for a party and the positive role it must play:

In Russia, however, the social democratic party must make up by its own efforts an entire historical period. It must lead the Russian proletarians from their present “atomised” condition, which prolongs the autocratic regime, to a class organisation that

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3: Quoted in Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution* (London, 1962).

would help them to become aware of their historical objectives and prepare them to struggle to achieve those objectives.<sup>4</sup>

The social democrats are the most enlightened, the most class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat. They cannot and dare not wait, in a fatalistic fashion with folded arms for the advent of the “revolutionary situation”.<sup>5</sup>

Yet there is a continual equivocation in Luxemburg’s writings on the role of the party. She was concerned that the leading role of the party should not be too great—for she identified this as “the prudent position of social democracy”. She identified “centralism”, which she saw as anyway necessary (“the social democracy is, as a rule, hostile to any manifestation of localism or federalism”) with the “conservatism inherent in such an organ [i.e. the Central Committee]”. Such equivocation cannot be understood without taking account of the concrete situation Luxemburg was really concerned about. She was a leading member of the SPD, but always uneasy about its mode of operation. When she really wanted to illustrate the dangers of centralism it was to this that she referred:

The present tactical policy of the German social democracy has won universal esteem because it is supple as well as firm. This is a sign of the fine adaptation of our party to the conditions of a parliamentary regime... However, the very perfection of this adaptation is already closing vaster horizons to our party.

Brilliantly prophetic as this is of what was to happen in 1914, she does not begin to explain the origins of the increasing sclerosis and ritualism of SPD, let alone indicate ways of fighting this. Conscious individuals and groups cannot resist this trend. For “such inertia is due, to a large degree to the fact that it is inconvenient to define, within the vacuum of abstract hypotheses, the lines and forms of

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4: Rosa Luxemburg, *Leninism or Marxism* (Ann Arbor, 1962).

5: Rosa Luxemburg, *The Mass Strike* (London, 1986).

non-existent political situations”. Bureaucratisation of the party is seen as an inevitable phenomenon that only a limitation on the degree of cohesion and efficiency of the party can overcome.

It is not a particular form of organisation and conscious direction, but organisation and conscious direction as such that limit the possibilities for the “self-conscious movement of the majority in the interests of the majority”:

The unconscious comes before the conscious. The logic of history comes before the subjective logic of the human beings who participate in the historic process. The tendency is for the directing organs of the socialist party to play a conservative role.<sup>6</sup>

There is a correct and important element in this argument: the tendency for certain sorts of organisations to be unable (or unwilling) to respond to a rapidly changing situation. Even the Bolshevik Party contained a very strong tendency to exhibit such conservatism. But Luxemburg, having made the diagnosis, makes no attempt to locate its source, except in epistemological generalities, or looks for organisational remedies. There is a strong fatalism in her hope that the “unconscious” will be able to correct the “conscious”. Despite her superb sensitivity to the peculiar tempo of development of the mass movement—particularly in *The Mass Strike*—she shies away from trying to work out a clear conception of the sort of political organisation that can harness such spontaneous developments. Paradoxically this most trenchant critic of bureaucratic ritualism and parliamentary cretinism argued in the 1903 debate for precisely that faction of the Russian party that was to be the most perfected historical embodiment of these failings: the Mensheviks. In Germany political opposition to Kautskyism, which already was developing at the turn of the century and was fully formed by 1910, did not take on concrete organisational forms for another five years.

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6: Rosa Luxemburg, *Leninism or Marxism*.

Considerable parallels exist between Luxemburg's position and that which Trotsky adheres to up to 1917. He too is very aware of the danger of bureaucratic ritualism:

The work of agitation and organisation among the ranks of the proletariat has an internal inertia. The European socialist parties, particularly the largest of them, the German social democratic party, have developed an inertia in proportion as the great masses have embraced socialism and the more these masses have become organised and disciplined. As a consequence of this, social democracy as an organisation embodying the political experience of the proletariat may at a certain moment become a direct obstacle to open conflict between the workers and bourgeois reaction.<sup>7</sup>

Again his revolutionary spirit leads him to distrust all centralised organisation. Lenin's conception of the party can, according to Trotsky in 1904, only lead to the situation in which, "The organisation of the party substitutes itself for the party as a whole; then the central committee substitutes itself for the organisation; and finally the 'dictator' substitutes himself for the central committee."

But for Trotsky the real problems of working class power can only be solved "by way of systematic struggle between...many trends inside socialism, trends which will inevitably emerge as soon as the proletarian dictatorship poses tens and hundreds of new...problems. No strong 'domineering' organisation will be able to suppress these trends and controversies".<sup>8</sup>

Yet Trotsky's fear of organisational rigidity leads him also to support that tendency in the inner-party struggle in Russia which was historically to prove itself most frightened by the spontaneity of mass action. Although he was to become increasingly alienated from the Mensheviks politically, he did not begin to build up an organisation in opposition to them until very late. Whether he was

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7: Leon Trotsky, *Permanent Revolution*.

8: Quoted in Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed* (London, 1954).

correct or not in his criticisms of Lenin in 1904 (and we believe he was wrong), he was only able to become an effective historical actor in 1917 by joining Lenin's party.

If organisation does produce bureaucracy and inertia, Luxemburg and the young Trotsky were undoubtedly right about the need to limit the aspirations towards centralism and cohesion among revolutionaries. But it is important to accept all the consequences of this position. The most important must be a historical fatalism. Individuals can struggle among the working class for their ideas, and these ideas can be important in giving workers the necessary consciousness and confidence to fight for their own liberation. But revolutionaries can never build the organisation capable of giving them effectiveness and cohesion in action comparable to that of those who implicitly accept present ideologies. For to do so is inevitably to limit the self-activity of the masses, the "unconscious" that precedes the "conscious". The result must be to wait for "spontaneous" developments among the masses. In the meantime one might as well put up with the organisations that exist at present, even if one disagrees with them politically, as being the best possible, as being the maximum present expression of the spontaneous development of the masses.

## **Lenin and Gramsci**

In the writings of Lenin there is an ever-present implicit recognition of the problems that worry Luxemburg and Trotsky so much. But there is not the same fatalistic succumbing to them. There is an increasing recognition that it is not organisation as such, but particular forms and aspects of organisation that give rise to these. Not until the First World War and then the events in 1917 gave an acute expression to the faults of old forms of organisation did Lenin begin to give explicit notice of the radically new conceptions he himself was developing. Even then these were not fully developed.

The destruction of the Russian working class, the collapse of any meaningful Soviet system (i.e. one based upon real workers' councils), and the rise of Stalinism, smothered the renovation of socialist theory. The bureaucracy that arose with the decimation

and demoralisation of the working class took over the theoretical foundations of the revolution, to distort them into an ideology justifying its own interests and crimes. Lenin's view of what the party is and how it should function in relation to the class and its institutions, was no sooner defined as against older social democratic conceptions with any clarity than it was again obscured by a new Stalinist ideology.

Many of Lenin's conceptions are, however, taken up and given clear and coherent theoretical form by the Italian Antonio Gramsci. What is usually ignored by commentators on Lenin is that throughout his writings are two intertwined and complementary conceptions, which to the superficial observer seem contradictory. Firstly there is continual stress on the possibilities of sudden transformations of working class consciousness, on the unexpected upsurge that characterises working class self-activity:

In the history of revolutions there come to light contradictions that have ripened for decades and centuries. Life becomes unusually eventful. The masses, which have always stood in the shade and therefore have often been despised by superficial observers, enter the political arena as active combatants...nothing will ever compare in importance with this direct training that the masses and the classes receive in the course of the revolutionary struggle itself.

Even in the worst months after the outbreak of war in 1914 he could write:

The objective war-created situation...is inevitably engendering revolutionary sentiments; it is tempering and enlightening all the finest and most class-conscious proletarians. A sudden change in the mood of the masses is not only possible, but is becoming more and more probable.

In 1917 this faith in the masses leads him in April and in August-September into conflict with his own party: "Lenin said more than

once that the masses are to the left of the party. He knew the party was to the left of its own upper layer of ‘old Bolsheviks’”.<sup>9</sup>

There is, however, a second fundamental element in Lenin’s thought and practice: the stress on the role of theory and of the party as the bearer of this. The most well-known recognition of this occurs in *What is to be Done?* when Lenin writes that “without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary practice”. But it is the theme that recurs at every stage in his activities, not only in 1903, but also in 1905 and 1917 at exactly the same time that he was cursing the failure of the party to respond to the radicalisation of the masses. And for him the party is something very different from the mass organisations of the whole class. It is always a vanguard organisation, membership of which requires a dedication not to be found in most workers. (But this does not mean that Lenin ever wanted an organisation only of professional revolutionaries.)

This might seem a clear contradiction. Particularly as in 1903 Lenin uses arguments drawn from Kautsky which imply that only the party can imbue the class with a socialist consciousness, while later he refers to the class being more “to the left” than the party. In fact, however, to see a contradiction here is to fail to understand the fundamentals of Lenin’s thinking on these issues. For the real theoretical basis for his argument on the party is not that the working class is incapable on its own of coming to theoretical socialist consciousness.

The real basis for his argument is that the level of consciousness in the working class is never uniform. However rapidly the mass of workers learn in a revolutionary situation, some sections will still be more advanced than others. To merely take delight in the spontaneous transformation is to accept uncritically whatever transitory products this throws up. But these reflect the backwardness of the class as well as its movement forward, its situation in bourgeois society as well as its potentiality of further development so as to make a revolution. Workers are not automatons without ideas. If they

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9: Leon Trotsky, *History of the Russian Revolution* (London, 1965).

are not won over to a socialist world view by the intervention of conscious revolutionaries, they will continue to accept the bourgeois ideology of existing society. This is all the more likely because it is an ideology that flavours all aspects of life at present and is perpetuated by all media. Even were some workers “spontaneously” to come to a fully fledged scientific standpoint they would still have to argue with others who had not:

To forget the distinction between the vanguard and the whole of the masses gravitating towards it, to forget the vanguard’s constant duty of raising ever-wider sections to its own advanced level, means simply to deceive oneself, to shut one’s eyes to the immensity of our tasks, and to narrow down these tasks.

This argument is not one that can be restricted to a particular historical period. It is not one, as some people would like to argue, that applies to the backward Russian working class of 1902 but not to those in the advanced nations today. The absolute possibilities for the growth of working class consciousness may be higher in the latter, but the very nature of capitalist society continues to ensure a vast unevenness within the working class. To deny this is to confuse the revolutionary potential of the working class with its present situation. As he writes against the Mensheviks (and Rosa Luxemburg!) in 1905:

Use fewer platitudes about the development of the independent activity of the workers—the workers display no end of independent revolutionary activity which you do not notice!—but see to it rather that you do not demoralise undeveloped workers by your own tailism.<sup>10</sup>

In short: stop talking about what the class as a whole can achieve, and start talking about how we as part of its development are going to act. As Gramsci writes:

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10: By “tailism”, Lenin means following the tail of the workers, i.e. simply celebrating their spontaneous struggles—*editor’s note*.

Pure spontaneity does not exist in history: it would have to coincide with pure mechanical action. In the “most spontaneous” of movements the elements of “conscious direction” are only uncontrollable... There exists a multiplicity of elements of conscious direction in these movements, but none of them is predominant.

Human beings are never without some conception of the world. They never develop apart from some collectivity. “For his conception of the world a man always belongs to some grouping, and precisely to that of all the social elements who share the same way of thinking and working.” Unless he is involved in a constant process of criticism of his world view so as to bring it coherence:

He belongs simultaneously to a multiplicity of men-masses, his own personality is made up in a queer way. It contains elements of the caveman and principles of the most modern advanced learning, shabby prejudices of all past historical phases, and intuitions of a future philosophy of the human race united all over the world...

The active man of the masses works practically, but does not have a clear theoretical consciousness of his actions, which is also a knowledge of the world insofar as he changes it. Rather his theoretical consciousness may be opposed to his actions. We can almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness), one implicit in his actions, which unites him with all his colleagues in the practical transformation of reality, and one superficially explicit or verbal which he has inherited from the past and which he accepts without criticism... [This division can reach the point] where the contradiction within his consciousness will not permit any action, any decision, any choice, and produces a state of moral and political passivity.<sup>11</sup>

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11: Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince and other Essays* (London, 1957).

All action is the result of diverse wills affected with a varying degree of intensity, of consciousness, of homogeneity with the entire mass of the collective will... It is clear that the corresponding, implicit theory will be a combination of beliefs and points of view as confused and heterogeneous. [If practical forces released at a certain historical point are to be] effective and expansive [it is necessary to] construct on a determined practice a theory that, coinciding with and being identified with the decisive elements of the same practice, accelerates the historical process in act, makes the practice more homogeneous, coherent, more efficacious in all its elements.

In this sense the question as to the preferability of “spontaneity” or “conscious direction” becomes that of whether it is:

preferable to think without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and irregular way, in other words to “participate” in a conception of the world “imposed” mechanically by external environment, that is by one of the many social groups in which everyone is automatically involved from the time he enters the conscious world, or is it preferable to work out one’s own conception of the world consciously and critically.

Parties exist in order to act in this situation to propagate a particular world view and the practical activity corresponding to it. They attempt to unite together into a collectivity all those who share a particular world view and to spread this. They exist to give homogeneity to the mass of individuals influenced by a variety of ideologies and interests. But they can do this in two ways.

The first Gramsci characterises as that of the Catholic Church. This attempts to bind a variety of social classes and strata to a single ideology. It attempts to unite intellectuals and “ordinary people” in a single organised world view. But it can only do this by an iron discipline over the intellectuals that reduces them to the level of the “ordinary people”. “Marxism is antithetical to this Catholic position.” Instead it attempts to unite intellectuals and workers so as to

constantly raise the level of consciousness of the masses, so as to enable them to act truly independently. This is precisely why Marxists cannot merely “worship” the spontaneity of the masses: this would be to copy the Catholics in trying to impose on the most advanced sections the backwardness of the least.

For Gramsci and Lenin this means that the party is constantly trying to make its newest members rise to the level of understanding of its oldest. It has always to be able to react to the “spontaneous” developments of the class, to attract those elements that are developing a clear consciousness as a result of these:

To be a party of the masses not only in name, we must get ever-wider masses to share in all party affairs, steadily to elevate them from political indifference to protest and struggle, from a general spirit of protest to an adoption of [socialist] views, from adoption of these views to support of the movement, from support to organised membership in the party.<sup>12</sup>

The party able to fulfil these tasks will not, however, be the party that is necessarily “broadest”. It will be an organisation that combines with a constant attempt to involve in its work ever wider circles of workers, a limitation on its membership to those willing to seriously and scientifically appraise their own activity and that of the party generally. This necessarily means that the definition of what constitutes a party member is important. The party is not to be made up of just anybody who wishes to identify himself as belonging to it, but only those willing to accept the discipline of its organisations. In normal times the numbers of these will be only a relatively small percentage of the working class, but in periods of upsurge they will grow immeasurably.

There is an important contrast here with the practice in social democratic parties. Lenin himself realises this only insofar as Russia is concerned prior to 1914, but his position is clear. He contrasts his

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12: V I Lenin, *Collected Works*.

aim—"a really iron strong organisation", a "small but strong party" of "all those who are out to fight"—with the "sprawling monster...of the Mensheviks". This explains his insistence on making a principle out of the question of the conditions for membership of the party when the split with the Mensheviks occurred.

Within Lenin's conception those elements that he himself is careful to regard as historically limited and those of general application must be distinguished. The former concern the stress on closed conspiratorial organisations and the need for careful direction from the top down of party officials, etc: "Under conditions of political freedom our party will be built entirely on the elective principle. Under the autocracy this is impracticable for the collective thousands of workers that make up the party."

Of much more general application is the stress on the need to limit the party to those who are going to accept its discipline. It is important to stress that for Lenin (as opposed to many of his would-be followers) this is not a blind acceptance of authoritarianism.

The revolutionary party exists so as to make it possible for the most conscious and militant workers and intellectuals to engage in scientific discussion as a prelude to concerted and cohesive action. This is not possible without general participation in party activities. This requires clarity and precision in argument combined with organisational decisiveness. The alternative is the "marsh"—where elements motivated by scientific precision are so mixed up with those who are irremediably confused as to prevent any decisive action, effectively allowing the most backward to lead. The discipline necessary for such a debate is the discipline of those who have "combined by a freely adopted decision". Unless the party has clear boundaries and unless it is coherent enough to implement decisions, discussion over its decisions, far from being "free", is pointless.

Centralism for Lenin is far from being the opposite of developing the initiative and independence of party members; it is the precondition of this. It is worth noting how Lenin summed up the reasons for his battle for centralism over the previous two years in 1905. Talking of the role of the central organisation and of the central paper he says that the result was to be the:

creation of a network of agents [that] would not have to sit round waiting for the call to insurrection, but would carry out such regular activity that would guarantee the highest probability of success in the event of an insurrection. Such activity would strengthen our connections with the broadest masses of the workers and with all strata that are discontented with the aristocracy... Precisely such activity would serve to cultivate the ability to estimate correctly the general political situation and, consequently, the ability to select the proper moment for the uprising. Precisely such activity would train all local organisations to respond simultaneously to the same political questions, incidents, and events that agitate the whole of Russia and to react to these "incidents" in the most rigorous, uniform and expedient manner possible.

By being part of such an organisation, worker and intellectual alike are trained to assess their own concrete situation in accordance with the scientific socialist activity of thousands of others. "Discipline" means acceptance of the need to relate individual experience to the total theory and practice of the party. As such it is not opposed to, but a necessary prerequisite of the ability to make independent evaluations of concrete situations. That is also why "discipline" for Lenin does not mean hiding differences that exist within the party, but rather exposing them to the full light of day so as to argue them out. Only in this way can the mass of members make scientific evaluations. The party organ must be open to the opinions of those it considers inconsistent.

In short, what matters is that there is political clarity and hardness in the party so as to ensure that all its members are brought into its debate and understand the relevance of their own activity. That is why it is absurd, as the Mensheviks tried to do, and as some people still do, to confuse the party with the class. The class as a whole is constantly engaged in unconscious opposition to capitalism; the party is that section of it that is already conscious and unites to try to give conscious direction to the struggle of the rest. Its discipline is not something imposed from the top downwards, but rather

something that is voluntarily accepted by all those who participate in its decisions and act to implement these.

### **Types of party**

We can now see the difference between the party as Lenin conceived it and the social democratic party simultaneously envisaged and feared by Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky. The latter was thought of as a party of the whole class. The coming to power of the class was to be the party taking power. All the tendencies within the class had to be represented within it. Any split within it was to be conceived of as a split within the class. Centralisation, although recognised as necessary, was feared as a centralisation over and against the spontaneous activity of the class. Yet it was precisely in this sort of party that the “autocratic” tendencies warned against by Luxemburg were to develop most. For within it the confusion of member and sympathiser, the massive apparatus needed to hold together a mass of only half-politicised members in a series of social activities, led to a toning down of political debate, a lack of political seriousness, which in turn reduced the ability of the members to make independent political evaluations, and increased the need for apparatus-induced involvement.

Without an organisational centralisation aimed at giving clarity and decisiveness to political differences, the independence of the rank and file members was bound to be permanently undermined. Ties of personal affection or of deference to established leaders become more important than scientific, political evaluation. In the marsh, where no one takes a clear road, even if the wrong one, then there is no argument as to which is the right one. Refusal to relate organisational ties to political evaluations, even if done under the noble intention of maintaining a “mass party”, necessarily led to organisational loyalties replacing political ones.

It is essential to understand that the Stalinist party is not a variant of the Bolshevik party. It too was dominated by organisational structures. Adherence to the organisation rather than to the politics of the organisation mattered. Theory existed to justify an externally determined practice, not vice versa. Organisational loyalties of the apparatus are responsible for political decisions (the former relate in

turn to the needs of the Russian state apparatus). It is worth noting that in Russia a real victory of the apparatus over the party required precisely the bringing into the party of hundreds of thousands of “sympathisers”, a dilution of the “party” by the “class”.

The Leninist party does not suffer from this tendency to bureaucratic control precisely because it restricts its membership to those willing to be serious and disciplined enough to take political and theoretical issues as their starting point, and to subordinate all their activities to these.

But does this not imply a very elitist conception of the party? In a sense it does, although this is not the fault of the party, but of life itself, which gives rise to an uneven development of working class consciousness. The party to be effective has to aim at recruiting all those it conceives of as being most “advanced”. It cannot reduce its own level of science and consciousness merely in order not to be an “elite”. It cannot, for instance, accept that chauvinist workers are “as good as” internationalist party members, so as to take account of the “self-activity” of the class. But to be a “vanguard” is not the same as to substitute one’s own desires, or policies or interests, for those of the class.

Here it is important to see that for Lenin the party is not the embryo of the workers’ state—the workers’ council is. The working class as a whole will be involved in the organisations that constitute its state, the most backward as well as the most progressive elements. “Every cook will govern.” In Lenin’s major work on the state, the party is hardly mentioned. The function of the party is not to be the state, but rather to carry out continual agitation and propaganda among more backward elements of the class so as to raise their self-consciousness and self-reliance to the pitch that they will both set up workers’ councils and fight to overthrow the forms of organisation of the bourgeois state. The soviet state is the highest concrete embodiment of the self-activity of the whole working class; the party is that section of the class that is most conscious of the world historical implications of this self-activity.

The functions of the workers’ state and of the party should be quite different (which is why there can be more than one party in a

workers' state). One has to represent all the diverse interests of all the sections—geographical, industrial, etc—of the workers. It has to recognise in its mode of organisation all the heterogeneity of the class. The party, on the other hand, is built around those things that unite the class nationally and internationally. It constantly aims, by ideological persuasion, to overcome the heterogeneity of the class. It is concerned with national and international political principles, not parochial concerns of individual groups of workers. It can only persuade, not coerce these into accepting its lead.

An organisation that is concerned with participating in the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism by the working class cannot conceive of substituting itself for the organs of direct rule of that class. Such a perspective is only available to the social democratic or Stalinist party. Existing under capitalism, the revolutionary organisation will of necessity have a quite different structure to that of the workers' state that will arise in the process of overthrowing capitalism. The revolutionary party will have to struggle within the institution of the workers' state for its principles as against those with opposed ones; this is only possible because it itself is not the workers' state.

This enables us to see that Lenin's theory of the party and his theory of the state are not two separate entities, capable of being dealt with in isolation from one another. Until he developed the theory of the state, he tended to regard the Bolshevik Party as a peculiar adaptation to Russian circumstances. Given the social democratic (and later the Stalinist) conception of the party becoming the state, it is only natural for genuinely revolutionary and therefore democratic socialists not to want to restrict the party to the most advanced sections of the class, even if the need for such an organisation of the most conscious sections is recognised.

This explains Rosa Luxemburg's ambiguity over the question of political organisation and theoretical clarity. It enables her to counterpose the "errors committed by a truly revolutionary movement" to the "infallibility of the cleverest central committee". But if the party and the institutions of class power are distinct (although one attempts to influence the other) the "infallibility" of the one is a central component in the process by which the other learns from its

errors. It is Lenin who sees this. It is Lenin who draws the lessons, not (at least until the very end of her life) Luxemburg.

The need is still to build an organisation of revolutionary Marxists that will subject their situation and that of the class as a whole to scientific scrutiny, will ruthlessly criticise their own mistakes, and will, while engaging in the everyday struggles of the mass of workers, attempt to increase their independent self-activity by unremittingly opposing their ideological and practical subservience to the old society. A reaction against the identification of class and party elite made by both social democracy and Stalinism is very healthy. It should not, however, prevent a clear-sighted perspective of what we have to do to overcome their legacy.

# SPONTANEITY, STRATEGY AND POLITICS

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CHRIS HARMAN

Extracts from *International Socialism 104* (2004)

SOMETIMES THE symbolism of events gives them an importance out of all proportion to the numbers of people directly involved in them. Such was the case with the protests outside the Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organisation on 30 November 1999. The demonstrations themselves were not particularly large compared with many since. There were perhaps 30,000 demonstrators at the height of the protests.

But they signalled something of enormous importance. Almost exactly ten years earlier the fall of the Berlin Wall had been presented as the end of socialism, leaving capitalism in apparently unchallenged control of the world for the rest of humanity's existence. Seattle was the eruption of a new challenge. Out of Seattle a new international movement began to coalesce.<sup>1</sup>

But the growth of any movement forces it to confront arguments it has often been tempted to avoid in its initial period. Four

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1: This article was written for a quite specific point in the struggle. However, the sections dealing with different strategies in the anti-capitalist movement that emerged from Seattle, which we reproduce here, remain useful in understanding the varieties of political organisation activists look to—*editor's note*.

main trends can be seen within the arguments over strategy and tactics that have opened up in the movement, influencing its further development. And although very many activists insist that the movement cannot be political, each trend is characterised by its distinct attitude to the power of the state—that is, by an approach to politics. In this sense, the movement has spontaneously generated political currents within itself.

### **The reformist currents**

A key to the success of the movement from Seattle onwards had been drawing together people involved in a mass of single-issue campaigns and, in so doing, creating an awareness that they have a common enemy. But the inevitable corollary of this was an initial tendency to see things in terms of reforming the present system in some way, not overthrowing it. After all, single-issue campaigns are about forcing a change to certain abhorrent features of the present system, that is, about getting reforms.

Reformism is not some foreign implant in any great struggle. It is the first reaction of any group which begins to protest against oppression and exploitation. Its members have been brought up in existing society and usually know no other. They take it for granted things can only be organised in certain ways and that they can only fight for adjustments to these.

But the momentum of struggle for reforms can open people up to an awareness of the need to fight for much more thoroughgoing change—and of the power of their movements to do so. The tendency to see things in terms of a confrontation with the system as whole, rather than just one aspect, has grown ever more marked. From being implicitly anti-capitalist, the movement has become increasingly explicitly so.

Such radicalisation does not take place in some uniform manner. Reformism is not merely a set of ideas about how to improve society. It also finds embodiment in institutions of a various sorts—especially parliamentary institutions—which are based on channelling such ideas. Individuals who are prominent because of the connections with such institutions can play a very important role in providing

a focus for bringing movements about in the first place. By pulling people around them to press for change they create a focus for activity—and in doing so set off the tendency for movements to grow that look beyond mere reform. For this reason, the involvement of such individuals in initiating movements is not just something to be tolerated—it is to be positively encouraged. It is often the key to the movement growing.

Once a movement begins to make an impact, the role of the reformist leaders becomes increasingly contradictory. On the one hand they can still attract new, previously passive, people. On the other hand, their reformism implies keeping things within safe grounds for existing society (and often boosting their own position within it). They tend to want to dampen down the militancy, the self-confidence and the self-activity of those already in motion. Figures that seem on the left before there is any movement can rapidly appear to be on the right when it has taken off. At this point the movement can only further develop insofar as challenges emerge to the leadership of such people.

A case in point has been that of the French activist Bernard Cassen. He played an important part in helping to build the post-Seattle movement as editor of the influential *Le Monde Diplomatique*, founder of the organisation against financial speculation, Attac, and initiator of the annual World Social Forums. He set out to counter the adoption of neoliberal policies by governments by building Attac around what he has described as “an action-oriented programme of popular education”—with particular emphasis placed on the involvement of parliamentarians and other opinion formers. Cassen’s efforts helped ensure that Attac gained a membership of tens of thousands. But a point was reached where he began to take a hostile approach to its further development, resisting the merging of the movement into the struggle against war. At the very time that the French government was working with the US to attack Afghanistan, the energies of his movement in France were devoted to lobbying ministers for a “Tobin tax” on financial speculation.

He was bitterly opposed to the militancy on display at the Florence European Social Forum of 2002, his solution to the power of

US imperialism was to say the left should consider supporting the creation of a European army, and by the time of the mobilisation against the G8 meeting on the Swiss-French border in the summer of 2003 he was attacking the movement for becoming too radical.

Certain reformist leaders have played a similarly contradictory role in the anti-war movements in Britain, Spain, Italy and elsewhere. The huge mobilisations of 15 February 2003 depended on the initiative of far left, Muslim and peace organisations, but also on the participation of well-known figures from parliamentary reformism—for instance, the Democratic Left in Italy, the PSOE in Spain, the Greek Pasok. Their presence helped ensure there were millions, not just hundreds of thousands, on the streets. Yet once the war started, many held back from going on to come out clearly against the occupation and merely called for it to be under UN rather than US auspices.

In a similar way, leading figures in the Brazilian Workers Party played a very important part in the building of the first three social forums in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Their involvement made the events a focus for activists from all over Latin America and beyond. Now some of those leading figures are in a government implementing neoliberal policies through an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

### **Autonomist trends**

One expression of the way in which the movement has “spontaneously” begun to go beyond its own starting points has been the growth of what is often called “autonomism”.

This catch-all term encompasses a whole range of very different ideological positions and practical activities—the building of mass single-issue campaigns, working through NGOs, taking part in militant non-violent direct action, a stress on local community organising, “do your own thing” alternative lifestyles, forms of cooperative production—and, on the fringes, the term is even applied to the minority militarism of the Black Bloc directed against the police and property. However, there are two features that typify all those to whom the term is applied.

There is a rejection of compromises and manoeuvring of official politics and the reformism that looks to it. Autonomism of all sorts stresses the role of activity from below, of the way in which people begin to challenge bureaucratic structures. It is a celebration of the way in which in struggling people begin to display incredible levels of initiative and creativity, matched by a growing capacity to organise themselves in ways which challenge established notions of hierarchy.

Autonomism at the same time rejects revolutionary organisation around strategic goals directed against the system as whole. Its denunciations of the revolutionary left are as hard as its denunciations of parliamentary careerists. It typically accuses revolutionaries of “vanguardism”, “authoritarianism”, “manipulation” or even “totalitarianism”. For it, politics of all sorts, whether directed to reforming the system or to overthrowing it, must be kept separate from the movement. Some versions of autonomism (what might be called “soft autonomism”) recognise that political parties have a role when it comes to elections. But that has to be a role external to the movements, so that the activities of the movements and the parties are “parallel” to each other. The parties must not intervene within the movements.

The strength of autonomism lies in its emphasis on activity from below and its moral rejection of compromise with the system. But it finds it difficult to go beyond that. It is an assertion that the system is horrible and that the way to fight it is to develop forms of action by which particular groups assert their independence from aspects of the system. The system is to be fought simply by the summation of different groups doing their own thing.

Autonomists rarely express their views theoretically. Theory, after all, is usually linked to concerns with the elaboration of strategies, and autonomism by definition rejects strategy as hierarchising some forms of action over others. There have, however, been two influential attempts to theorise its positions. The first, *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri, is referred to more than it is actually read (its language is often very obscure indeed). Its “strategy” is essentially a non-strategy of re-baptising the conglomeration of different autonomous activities as a “multitude” and justifying this by

metaphysical references to Spinoza. Insofar as it hierarchises anything, it is the role of what it calls “informational workers”, which to me sounds very much like extolling the narrow base of some of the existing “autonomous” movements among people who have been through higher education.

The second has been John Holloway’s *Change the World Without Taking Power*. This is a more readable book than *Empire* and, despite a peculiar terminology of its own, does in places expound powerfully Marxist ideas about exploitation and alienation, complete with some notion of the working class. Its attack on Stalinist and authoritarian approaches to organisation has found it a following in those countries (South Asia, Latin America) where these approaches long dominated what claimed to be revolutionary movements. However, its strategic conclusion, like that of Hardt and Negri, is a rejection of strategy. In Holloway’s account, the shrieks of anger with which different groups react to the horrors of the system will somehow come together to dissolve the ties of subordination that bind everyone to the system—including the armed thugs of the state. There is no need ever to take power because the state will simply collapse as autonomy takes over.

In reality, Holloway’s argument amounts to little more than a reformulation of the old reformist argument that if enough people want to change society, the ruling class will be forced to hand over power without a shot being fired. Its popularity among sections of people in Latin America suggests that they (and Holloway) need reminding of what the generals did to what were genuinely “autonomous” movements of workers, peasants and indigenous people in, say, Brazil in 1964 or Chile in 1973.

But much of Holloway’s focus is not on the spontaneous dissolution of the state at some hypothetical time in the future. It is on the ability of movements to achieve things in the here and now, without any need to worry about the state or the future. His prime example is the Zapatistas in Mexico. They, he argues, have provided an example of how to become autonomous while leaving the state machine intact.

Unfortunately, the reality is rather different. The Zapatistas started off as an armed movement directed against the state. They came to

prominence in 1994 when they staged armed uprisings across parts of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas. Their proclamations of hostility to neoliberal globalisation found an echo right across the world, and became one of the first focuses for the movement that burst through at Seattle. But the uprisings themselves failed and the Zapatistas were forced back into being essentially defensive organisations for the indigenous people of the Lacandon forest region.

From there they have on occasions been able to bargain with the Mexican government for an improvement in indigenous rights and local government structures—especially when they have received wider support from other sections of Mexico’s workers and peasants, as during their march to Mexico City three years ago. But this has been bargaining over reforms in an existing system which leaves them impoverished. As a journalist sympathetic to the Zapatistas from the Mexican left wing daily *La Jornada* wrote:

The very structure of the life of the community is cracking under the blows from life outside, which are particularly hard at a time of neoliberalism, recession and massive emigration... The rebel territory...cannot isolate itself from the markets for coffee, for handicraft products, for labour, for wood and for other resources, above all because the maize and products for self-consumption only provide food for a quarter of the year and everything else—food, medicine, clothes, etc—has to be bought in the market for money.

The indigenous communities are virtually imprisoned by the units of the Mexican army that patrol the roads leading to the forest and this in turn has led to a certain internal “militarisation” of them, so that Zapatista spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos himself has spoken of “the [Zapatista] military structure...contaminating in some ways the tradition of democracy and self-government”. The small reforms the indigenous people have gained are not to be dismissed out of hand. But to see them as an adequate response to the horrors inflicted on them by the world system is to collapse into the meanest form of reformism. In extolling such “autonomous” movements as

an end in themselves, Holloway is close to the century-old formulation of the theorist of reformist social democrat, Eduard Bernstein: “The movement is everything, the final goal nothing.”

This is not some strange deviation of Holloway’s. Autonomism, insofar as it is not a question of simply making moral gestures and is concerned with doing something about the horrors of the world, easily flips over into reformism, albeit radical reformism. Those attracted by its anti-authoritarian emphasis on struggle from below can then only keep that emphasis by questioning some of the tenets of autonomism.

### **Radical reformism**

Reformism, it has to be repeated, involves more than manoeuvring within established political structures. It also involves the mobilising of people to exert pressure on those structures. And even as some reformist leaders retreat from pushing the movement forward, others continue to do so. Often this involves claims that the argument between reform and revolution is irrelevant in the world today, with the implication that all that we can do is fight for reform.

Radical reformists usually see more clearly than do proponents of “pure” autonomism that the movement needs strategy and tactics—even if their view of what is necessary is sometimes tinged with elements of manipulation, bureaucracy and parliamentarianism. They can see that some things are more important than others are and have to be prioritised if we are to be effective. They have an understanding that the movements face enemies who will destroy them (and in some Third World countries the activists as well) unless they work out when to fight, how to fight and with what forces. They see that we cannot afford to follow the autonomist precept, “Anything goes.” Hence the apparent contradiction that such reformists can sometimes have a better notion of what the movements need to do next than the apparently more radical autonomists.

Yet radical reformism can end up accepting autonomist arguments in much the same way that autonomism flips over into radical reformism. So Tony Benn, faced with the question of what to do about the New Labour leadership, has repeatedly replied that what

matters is not the leadership but the movement from below—as if the movement from below is built by ignoring what happens at the top. A member of the national council of the French Communist Party can criticise the record of the plural left government (in which the party had members) and then praise the arguments of Hardt and Negri. In such cases, when trying to pressurise existing institutions leads to an impasse, the radical reformists easily fall back upon simply extolling the creativity that can come from below. They run away from the need to hammer out strategies and tactics for fighting, in exactly the same way as the autonomists—and then often justify their stance by talking about the need to keep politics out of the movement.

### **The revolutionary trend**

This is the trend which insists, very clearly, that the enemy is capitalism, of which neoliberalism is just the ideological expression of the latest stage. It sees this stage as also involving the deployment by states of armed force in the interests of the capitals based within them. In other words, it sees imperialism as an organic outgrowth of capitalism and does not look to the state to deal with the “excesses” of the system. Rather the workers and other exploited classes have to organise with the goal of overthrowing the existing state, and take the means of production into their own hands.

The trend remains a minority trend today. Its weakness is the product of the long period of defeats and demoralisation for those fighting the system. When movements have been defeated, activists victimised and their efforts fragmented, only relatively small numbers manage to hang on to notions of changing the whole world. They find themselves defending ideas that have little resonance among workers whose only recent experience has been of atomisation and defeats. Their organisations have difficulties sustaining themselves, as people fall by wayside, tired, disillusioned, sometimes won over to non-socialist ideas, and new recruits are only gained in ones and twos.

Something else often compounded the weakness. The years of defeat inevitably encouraged a certain sectarianism among those who stuck to the revolutionary tradition. They could only survive

by feeling that they were right against virtually the whole world, including those who had retreated from the revolutionary talk of the late 1960s and early 1970s into single-issue campaigns and identity politics. Under such circumstances they could be very defensive in the face of new movements influenced by these. Revolutionaries easily fell into a sectarian practice that involved standing aside from those movements—and even denouncing them—so making it easier for movement activists to dismiss the revolutionary approach out of hand even when they began to feel the reformist and autonomist approaches to be inadequate.

Finally, the heritage of Stalinism has added to the suspicion of the revolutionary approach among many in the movement. They fear that revolutionaries simply want to use the movements as “transmission belts” for their own political projects. The record of many revolutionary organisations in identifying the regimes that fell in 1989-91 as somehow socialist encourages such suspicion. It has even produced a situation where far left organisations who used to hold such views now say themselves that any political intervention of the far left within the movements would mean trying to turn them into transmission belts.

The result is a blindness to the way in which the movement—like any mass struggle—is giving rise “spontaneously” to debates which, whether people like it or not, have political parameters. And if revolutionaries do not provide an organised pole of attraction in these debates, then the argument will be won by default by those (the reformists) who offer a strategy of working within the existing system or those (the autonomists) who offer no strategy at all.

## Sample questions for discussion

- › If someone asked why Lenin’s model of organisation, developed in the highly specific context of Tsarist dictatorship in Russia, is appropriate to Britain today, how would you respond?
- › It is frequently argued in the movement today that centralised organisation inevitably leads to the domination of movements by small minorities, and that decisions ought to be made through consensus instead. How would you respond to such claims?
- › If a high level of class struggle led a future right-wing government to outlaw the Socialist Workers Party, how would it change how we organised?
- › How would you answer the criticism that the SWP is only interested in selling *Socialist Worker* and recruiting people to its ranks?

## Further reading

A full version of Chris Harman’s “Party and Class” is available in the edition of his *Selected Writings* published by Bookmarks. It is also online on the Marxists Internet Archive ([www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org)) where readers can find most of the texts by Lenin, Trotsky, Luxemburg and others cited in this pamphlet.

The best introduction to Lenin’s conception of the party, and the various forms it took in different periods, is Tony Cliff’s *Lenin: Building the Party 1893-1914* (Bookmarks). The essay by Cliff included here is from *Marxism at the Millennium* (Bookmarks).

The full version of Chris Harman’s “Spontaneity, Strategy and Politics” is available from *International Socialism* ([www.isj.org.uk](http://www.isj.org.uk)). In the journal, readers can find a wealth of material covering debates over strategy and tactics in the movement, including Alex Callinicos’s “Toni Negri in Perspective” and Paul Blackledge’s “Marxism and Anarchism”.