

What is Revolutionary Leadership?

Cliff Slaughter

1960

What is Revolutionary Leadership?

An important element in the strength of a party or a class is the conception which the party or the class has of the relationship of forces in the country.

— Leon Trotsky, 1931

But it is absurd to think of a purely “objective” foresight. The person who has foresight in reality has a “programme” that he wants to see triumph, and foresight is precisely an element of this triumph.

— Antonio Gramsci

The decisive element in every situation is the force, permanently organized and pre-ordered over a long period, which can be advanced when one judges that the situation is favourable (and it is favourable only to the extent to which such a force exists and is full of fighting ardour); therefore, the essential task is that of paying systematic and patient attention to forming and developing this force, rendering it ever more homogeneous, compact, conscious of itself.

—Antonio Gramsci

...every shortcoming in historical duty increases the necessary disorder and prepares more serious catastrophes.

—Antonio Gramsci

(In this article I have drawn heavily upon Gramsci, *The Modern Prince* and to a lesser extent on Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*.)

GRAMSCI, brilliant intellectual and founder of the Italian Communist Party, and Trotsky, towering example of revolutionary leadership in theory and in practice, had good reason to write the words cited above. Trotsky, exiled by the Stalinist bureaucracy, was urging a policy of United Front on the Communist Party of Germany as the only defence against the danger of Nazism. Gramsci, after the defeat of the Workers' Councils movement in Italy, in which he himself

was so prominent, found himself in Mussolini's jail. Eventually Trotsky met his death, 20 years ago, at the hands of Stalin's agents; Gramsci's health was destroyed in prison and he died a young man, a few days after his release in 1937.

Neither of these two men, the most original Marxist thinkers since Lenin, is regarded with favour by the official 'Communist' movement. Despite Khrushchev's admission that the trials of the 1930s were based on confessions extracted by torture, the slanders about Trotsky's plot against the USSR, his alliance with Hitler, and so on, are allowed to remain as part of the total censorship on his work that exists in the Communist Parties. In 1957 a small selection of Gramsci's writings was published by Lawrence and Wishart. However, *The Modern Prince*, longest essay in this selection, was quite heavily cut, and precious little space was devoted to Gramsci's major contribution on Workers' Councils. One appreciates the great effort made by Dr. Louis Marks, the translator, to bring even this much of Gramsci to English readers; at the same time it must be said that the cuts in *The Modern Prince* are unacknowledged, and that several of the omitted sections (dealing with Rosa Luxemburg, with 'Caesarism', etc.) would have posed awkward questions for Stalinists.

Stalinism and Historical Materialism

It is characteristic that these two men should have laid great stress on the role of human consciousness, and of revolutionary leadership. Stalinism can no more entertain such an emphasis than can Social-Democracy. Reformism and opportunism are tied to the existing structure of power: a confused mixture of notions of fair play and expediency is the nearest they ever get to theory. Their political actions are based on an adjustment of the partial and temporary interests of sections of the working class to the existing economy and state power. This is why opportunists abhor theory, for theory insists on an understanding of each problem in terms of the all-round development of society, focused in our epoch on the working-class struggle for state power. Nor are the Stalinists in any better position; in the 'Communist' movement Marxist doctrine has hardened into an ideology: that is to say, particular phrases are taken from Marx and Lenin and used to justify the particular course taken by the Soviet bureaucracy. The authority naturally accruing to the Russian Communists after the October Revolution facilitated the spread of the degeneration of the Russian to the other Parties in the Communist International. These parties were 'shaken up', their leaderships changed, their structure arbitrarily fixed (under the name of 'Bolshevisation' of course!) until they were transmission belts for the international policies of Stalin's bureaucracy, rather than revolutionary parties of the working class.¹ In latter years, despite the 'exposure' of Stalin by Khrushchev, the political consequences of this relationship have even deepened,

¹For the process by which the Communist Party of the Soviet Union fell under the control of Stalin's faction, representing the class pressures of the petty-bourgeoisie in Russia on the basis of the international defeats of the working class, see L.D. Trotsky, *Third International After Lenin*, pages 147-163, and *The Revolution Betrayed*, and I. Deutscher, *The Prophet*

though of course they will inevitably produce a reaction inside the foreign parties, and eventually in the Soviet Party, Peaceful competition between the Soviet and the US economies is now clearly stated to be the major form of the conflict between imperialism and socialism. For this to go on, peaceful relations in the rest of the world must be preserved. And so the 'Communist' parties 'take the lead in the fight for peace'.

As a part of this process, certain theoretical distortions of Marxism play an important part. Above all, Marxism is twisted into an economic determinism. The dialectic is abstracted from history and reimposed on social development as a series of fixed stages. Instead of the rich variety and conflict of human history we have the natural series of slavery, feudalism, capitalism and socialism through which all societies pass. The USSR's present structure is thus sanctified as an 'inevitable' successor of capitalism and any 'criticisms' of its social and political structure must be regarded as 'secondary'. An apparent touch of flexibility is given to this schematic picture by the doctrine that different countries will find their 'own' roads to Socialism, learning from the USSR but adapting to their particular national characteristics. This is of course a mechanical caricature of historical materialism. The connection between the struggles of the working class for Socialism in, say, Britain, Russia and Vietnam, is not at all in the greater or lesser degree of similarity of social structure of those countries, but in the organic interdependence of their struggles. Capitalism is an international phenomenon, and the working class is an international force; the USSR is result of the first break-through of the world revolution, a result distorted by Russia's particular economic development before and after the October Revolution, and by the impact of imperialism and the fate of the working-class movement since then. Trotsky laid a firm basis for the study of the relation between the Soviet workers' state and the world working class in his writings between 1928 when 'Socialism in One Country' was first theoretically presented, and his death in 1940.

There are many Socialists who are naturally repelled by the bureaucratic distortion of Soviet society and of the Stalinist parties, as well as by the shameful record of Social-Democracy, and fail to escape from the distorted theory and method of Stalinism. Retaining that fundamental characteristic of Stalinism, loss of confidence in the ability of the working class of the advanced capitalist countries to conquer power, they dress up this loss of nerve with 'theoretical' ideas which have been current in the anti-Bolshevik sections of the Left since the October Revolution and even before. Elsewhere in this issue Brian Pearce takes certain historical questions bound up with the periodical 'discovery' that the USSR is a capitalist state, a discovery which of course leads away from certain uncomfortable political duties, such as the defence of the USSR against imperialism. In this article I want to take up another argument closely bound up with these same ideas, viz., that the root of the trouble lies in the Leninist concept of leadership of the working class by a centralized party and Lenin's

Unarmed.

‘party of a new type’.

The Role of Consciousness in History

Although this argument takes various forms (Lenin’s type of party was suited to autocratic Russia but not to democratic Britain; leadership will emerge naturally from the working class; all organizations develop bureaucracy; the success 1917 was a ‘historical accident’ taken advantage of by a brilliant Bolshevik elite; Rosa Luxemburg and Trotsky predicted the degeneration of the party etc., etc.), it is always underpinned by a false conception of the role of theory and consciousness in history, a tendency towards economic determinism, a notion that the laws of social development are something ‘natural’, standing above men and deciding their destinies. Political events and tendencies are seen as the ‘natural’ and inescapable reflection of economic interest; Marx’s concept of the political and ideological superstructure on the economic basis becomes a ‘mere superstructure’ of the economic struggle, as one of the founders of the new ‘Workers’ Party’ recently put it. This implies that politics is only the froth of history, whereas Marx was quite clear that it is in the sphere of politics that men become more or less conscious of the economic contradictions and fight out the issues. Precisely in politics, in the struggle for state power, is the decisive conflict fought out. Trade union and industrial struggle is a school of politics for the working class, in the older capitalist countries decades of trade union struggle were a necessary prelude to real **class conflict**; but the overthrow of political power and the institution of proletarian dictatorship is a qualitatively different question. For this, organization of a more advanced character, and therefore theory of a much wider and deeper character, is required. This means a political party which subordinates all partial struggles to the construction of a leadership firmly welded to the working class and completely devoted to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. Such a task requires the ability to learn from all past class struggles in society, particularly the failures and successes of the working-class movement, and an understanding of this history in relation to the total existing structure of society, not only in relation to the daily experience of the working class. The consciousness and organization required to achieve the greatest social overturn in history, these are the basic reasons for what has come to be known as democratic centralism, the bogey of so many ‘Left-wingers’.

The revolutionary party must incorporate as far as possible the understanding of capitalist society derived from all past theoretical advances and their testing-out by the working-class movement in history. In this tradition and theory there resides a more scientific truth than the working class can derive from its experience of exploitation and day-to-day struggle. Rather than humbly bowing before the experience of the class at ‘the point of production’, rather than assuming that the workers’ own experience will give rise to revolutionary consciousness, Marxists must on the contrary subordinate their political and theoretical work to the revolutionary party. This is the meaning of revolutionary discipline: that the consciousness represented by the Marxist party constitutes a

higher consciousness of the historical tasks of the working class than does the immediate consciousness of the class itself. Only by accepting the discipline of the party, then, does the individual Marxist achieve the prospect of playing an independent historical role. This has nothing in common with the bourgeois notion of ‘free’ individuals imposing their reason upon the world. Rather, an objective analysis of capitalist production demonstrates that the working class is its gravedigger; the working class is consequently the only independent and decisive force in the modern epoch. But classes and social movements have to be welded together as **forces** by consciously grasping their situation and organizing to overthrow the classes which stand in their way. The relation between party and class is an aspect of this process; it is not enough for the workers to constitute a class ‘objectively’, by reason of their all being wage-labourers: from being ‘a class **in** itself’ the proletariat must become ‘a class **for** itself’.

Now Lenin’s primary concern was to find the form of organization and strategy which would express this **political independence** of the working class. It is true that in Russia his opponents, the Mensheviks, were victims of the mechanical idea that the bourgeoisie was destined to come to power after the defeat of Tsarism; they therefore disagreed with Lenin’s notion of the proletariat **leading** the struggle against Tsarism, and so the political independence of the class did not arise for them until after the bourgeois revolution. However, Lenin’s conviction that the working class was the leading independent force in the modern era was part of his general view of ‘imperialism’ as the final stage of capitalism. The fundamentals of organization required for a politically independent working class are not in anyway specific to Russian conditions. Indeed, the essence of Lenin’s position against the Mensheviks should be much easier to grasp in a country which is highly mechanized, where a large proletariat confronts a bourgeoisie firmly established in power.

Imperialism and Lenin’s Conception of the Party

It is important to stress the connection between Lenin’s characterization of our epoch and his ideas on organization. Imperialism, with its rapid expansion of capital investment, the organization of production on a very large scale, more and more domination by finance-capital, and the concentration of standing armies and repressive forces equipped with weapons based on the highest levels of technique of mass production, has given rise to social forces and ideas which restrict and hold back the working class. In the imperialist countries themselves, a considerable stratum of the working class identifies its interests with the expansion of capitalism itself. The new bureaucratic state provides a larger number of administrative jobs for the upper layers of the working class and absorbs most of the disappearing old middle class. A new social group of functionaries, officials, managers, teachers has grown up, and on the basis of this group, together with the skilled working class, a strong opportunist tendency developed in the Labour Movement. In Britain, the early defeat of Chartism and the subsequent prolonged economic expansion led to the development of craft

unionism at the expense of political organization. When the new general unions had come on the scene, and the need for independent political representation was recognized, it was not revolutionists who presented themselves as the leaders, but men with a very different standpoint. Fabianism started not from the conception of the working class as a revolutionary force, with the struggle for reforms as part of the building of that force, but from the idea that the state should intervene to alleviate the insecurity and poverty caused by the unrestricted operation of the capitalist market. The more extreme reformists thought that state ownership of certain industries might be necessary to achieve this. In Germany, although the Marxist phrases of the Erfurt programme continued to dominate the statements of the Social-Democratic leaders, a similar development was taking place. The SPD (German Social Democratic Party) became a church of the working class rather than a revolutionary party. When the war of 1914-18 broke out, not only did the SPD deputies vote war credits to their 'national' governments, like almost every other reformist party in Europe, but they boasted of the service they had given the nation by helping create a disciplined, organized and cultured working class. This conduct of the SPD at the outbreak of war closed a chapter in the history of Marxism. In the epoch of imperialist wars there must be parties of men steeled to resist all jingoism and patriotism, to proclaim the slogan 'Turn the imperialist war into a civil war!' The working class of each country had the duty of 'revolutionary defeatism' since the main question was one of cracking the front of imperialism.

To many 'orthodox' Marxists this turn by Lenin was a leap in the dark, adventurism, folly, typical of the 'Blanquist, 'voluntarist' tendencies for which he had been so often criticised. But Lenin's 'fantastic' slogan was deeper and nearer to the needs of the masses than all the 'realism' of the old Social-Democracy. The German Social-Democratic leaders ended up, at the height of the Revolution in 1918, failing to support the demand for the Kaiser's abdication; and they gave 'Marxist' reasons for doing it: 'For the Social Democracy, the external form of the State is unimportant'! And when pressure from below forced their hands they issued a public statement to the effect that 'in insisting upon abdication, they had been motivated solely by the thought that only abdication could preserve order and prevent the spread of anarchy'. Without a doubt, a big factor in the fright of the Social Democratic leaders was the fact that the Russian Bolsheviks were already in power, and there was no telling where the process might stop in Germany. But again a 'Marxist' rationalization was offered: Scheidemann said afterwards, 'Political actions can, essentially only confirm an economic development'. It was just this kind of 'Marxism' that Lenin had to defeat in the course of building a revolutionary party in Russia. His whole effort was to assert the **dominance** of the role of the proletariat in determining the course of history in the 20th century, a dominance flowing not from any 'voluntarism' but from the nature of the crisis of capitalism, the character of imperialism as the highest form of capitalist contradictions.

Kautsky and others in the old Social-Democracy fell down on just this point. They were great exponents of Marxism as an explanatory theory of past history,

but Marx's conclusion about the necessity of proletarian dictatorship on the basis of modern socialized production was not fully grasped. To do this meant seeing the working class, its consciousness and its organization, as themselves decisive forces in history, not just as the **result** of history. That is the meaning of Gramsci's remarks at the head of this article. It is the direct opposite of Scheidemann's 'Political action can only confirm an economic development' and of all nonsense about politics being 'only the superstructure of the class struggle'. An interesting example of Lenin's method in these questions may be found in his writings during the period of reaction following the 1905 revolution. A certain Levitsky, somewhat in the strain of our own 'proletarian' Left-wingers, objected to the Bolshevik strategy of the working class leading the struggle for liberty against Tsarism. This he saw as a watering down of principle and advanced the slogan 'Not hegemony in the national struggle for political liberty, but a class party!' Lenin roundly condemned this sectarian nonsense, which amounted in effect to an abandonment of the political field to bourgeois leadership.²

Spontaneity and Sectarianism

In the Socialist Labour League recently, a small minority developed the idea that as the Labour Party was drifting rapidly to the Right, the only way for the Marxists to preserve their integrity was to set up a party quite independent in every way from the Labour Party. The Labour Party had ceased to be a working-class party in any sense, and a party must be formed which concentrated on the 'real' class struggle at 'the base', 'the point of production'. Not only did Behan and the others show by this trend their utter misunderstanding of the Marxist theory of society and politics, but their conduct gave a valuable lesson in the political importance of theoretical weakness of this kind, showing that with an incorrect theoretical approach and a wrong method, first-class historical blunders can be made. Just when the crisis in the British working-class movement approaches precisely its political peak, just when the contradiction between Social-Democracy and the historical needs of the working class is most sharply expressed in the issues of public ownership, defence and the relation between the organized working class and the Labour Party—at this point the cry goes up: abandon ship! It is the industrial struggle that matters above all! 'Reformism is best exposed at the point of production'!—once again those who fail to grasp the nettle of political action explain their failure with the most resounding of 'Marxist' phrases. Precisely by clinging to such abstract generalities do men get left behind by historical development. The essence of dialectics is not the ability to stand by and pronounce what is base and what is superstructure, but to know when, where and how to **act**. Behan insists on the need to go back to the programme of the Industrial Rank-and-File Conference of November, 1958, as if nothing has happened in the trade union movement

²Incidentally, Lenin's insistence on the leading role of the working class even during the period of defeat makes nonsense of those of his critics who claim that only during the revolutionary upsurge did Lenin stress this role of the proletariat (e.g., H. Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism*).

and the Labour Party since then. To confine the demands and activity of the working class at this point to the factory level would amount to betrayal; this is what was meant by the reply given to Behan's group at the Socialist Labour League Conference. Our resistance to sectarianism is not a doctrinal one only, but part of the lessons learned from the beheading of the German working-class movement, among others, when the Communist Party failed to follow the policy of the United Front of the working class from 1929 onwards.

One of the interesting features of sectarians is their ability to take up very opportunist positions on certain questions, and particularly on questions of organization. Again the basic theoretical weakness here is lack of understanding of the role of consciousness. To criticise Brian Behan's *Workers' Voice* would amount to the mistake of taking on not the strongest but the weakest statement of one's opponents' case, and so I take certain points in the first issue of that journal only as an aside, and in order to introduce some more general points. In line with his idea that the class itself must lead the revolution, Behan writes that any workers' organization, shop stewards' committee, etc., may submit amendments to the Constitution of the Workers' Party. This gives an appearance, of course, of a party open to the working class, not dictating to it but responding to it, and so on. But it is clearly only another example of the old 'economism'. Certainly no workers' party will be successful which is not responsive to changes in the moods of the working class, but that is a matter of **tactics**, of timing, of the form of propaganda, etc., and certainly **not** a question of programme, policy, constitution, which are determined on a basis of **theory**. The correctness of the policy of a Marxist party is not the extent to which it corresponds to the immediate consciousness of the workers. It is a matter rather of correct theoretical appraisal of all the social forces at work in a given period, including the role of the class and the party itself.

This raises the old question of the working class 'throwing up its own leadership' in times of struggle. It is a fact that in every section of the working class there spring up first-class militants with great organizing power and ability to advance the consciousness of their fellow-workers. Without such spontaneous rank-and-file leadership there could be no talk of revolution. But a revolutionary leadership is not just the sum of all these rank-and-file leaders, not just the 'linking-together of rank-and-file committees'. There must be beyond that, **above** that level, a **political** leadership. It is not just a matter of daily struggle between employers and workers, which might even culminate in 'one big strike', but of the conquest of state power, of asserting the revolutionary role of the working class in the transformation of every aspect of capitalist society. The place of the workers in capitalist production is the basis of their revolutionary historical role, but to assert that role they have to be organized politically and theoretically as well as industrially, and the theory required to do this represents a higher form of consciousness than that which flows from the experience of the proletariat. If Lenin was right to condemn the 'Economists' for bringing no theory to the Russian workers other than the news that their industrial struggles were vital, how much more necessary it is to insist on advancing the theory required by the

British working-class movement, with its scores of years of industrial organization, its opportunist leadership, and the complex international problems of leadership that have developed since Lenin's day?

This brings out another fundamental weakness of sectarianism: its tendency towards idealism. All the talk about 'no compromises' and keeping clear of the rottenness of reformism amounts to a fear of rubbing up against reality, and is accompanied by the search for some section of workers which remains unaffected and pure despite the economic boom, as a jumping-off ground to defeat reformism. No doubt it is a healthy reaction against bureaucratic reformism to insist on the roots of militancy in the working class itself, but there is no substitute for fighting the political battle. It is not enough to know that reformism is rotten, to condemn it roundly, and to insist on one's separateness from it; the point is, to take it seriously as a force in the British working class and defeat it on the arena of struggle. At this point, the political mistake of sectarianism ties in with the theoretical mistake of economic determinism or 'economism'. Somehow, it is assumed, the working class will develop revolutionary consciousness because it is exploited. But the ideological struggle within the working class is **real**, it has to be bitterly fought and won before the class can be fully mobilized for battle. When we say that the long-drawn-out crisis of British imperialism rots away the social basis of reformist politics, that is **not** to say that the reformists simply leave the scene and leave a vacant place for a naturally radicalized working class desiring a new form of party. Such a party has to be built in the course of struggle with the reformists, and it **has to be built by those who grasp the historical process theoretically; it does not grow 'naturally' or 'organically' out of the economic base.**

Theory and Ideology in the Working Class

When we say that political ideas and movements reflect the economic base we should remember that such reflection is a series of conscious acts. Men's consciousness is formed in an environment of social institutions controlled by the ruling class, institutions of repression and institutions for educational conditioning, staffed by people trained to operate these institutions as though they were part of a naturally or divinely ordained system. The majority of labour's own organizations have become tied to this structure of established institutions, and are staffed by the 'labour lieutenants of capitalism'. The proletariat's consciousness of its role has to be achieved in struggle against all these institutional forms and their ideological results. Without the highest degree of centralized organization, these ideological battles cannot be won. The crisis of imperialism, which is expressed in the colonial struggle, the arms race and atomic war as well as in the tendency towards slump, constantly produces cultural decay and breakdown. Movements of the extreme Right, like Fascism, are able to call upon depraved elements of the intelligentsia to mobilize petty bourgeois, lumpen proletarians and even numbers of industrial workers behind the most foul and hideous social programmes. The alternative of socialism or barbarism did not pose itself only

after Hiroshima, but was clearly before the eyes of the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg during the First World War. We are in an epoch which has been correctly characterized as one of a crisis of leadership. What is needed **above all** is a strongly disciplined leadership able to develop the theory of Imperialism, the Permanent Revolution, the relation between the Workers' States and the world revolution, and to establish its leadership of the working class. Unless this crisis of leadership is solved there will be no 'natural' growth towards Socialism but there will be all the danger of war and barbarism. In this vital sense those who protest against 'vanguardism', against 'too much centralization', represent a reactionary tendency in the working-class movement.

The opponents of democratic centralism like to talk about the inevitable crisis of capitalism as the source of revolutionary action in the working class: this is counterposed to the so-called 'voluntarism of the Leninists, who are supposed to think they can suck revolutionary situations out of their thumbs. But preparation of the class and of the party is the decisive question in social crises. It is true that periodically capitalism has undergone the most profound crises. We need only mention the Great Crash of 1929 and the consequent depression, and the post-war situation (1945) in Europe, when there returned, particularly in France and Italy, capitalists discredited by their war record and faced with the armed working class. In neither of these cases was revolution the outcome. Instead, helped by the Social-Democratic and Stalinist betrayals of the working class, the capitalists were able to ride the storm and in the earlier case to establish regimes which destroyed the possibility of revolution for many years. The elementary mistake of supposing that in the Marxist view consciousness and organization directly reflect economic need is one that must be conquered if there is to be a victorious revolution. The ideological reflection of changes in the economy lags behind. The machinery of this 'lag' is the structure of ruling-class power and education. There is necessary a theoretical **leap** in the working-class movement, the development of leadership which can grasp the significance of the underlying crisis in society and inform the activity of the class with that consciousness. What is important for the revolutionary class is that it must **not** remain determined in its thinking by the existing economy and institutions. As Gramsci puts it: 'An appropriate political initiative is always necessary to **free** the economic drive from the tethers of traditional policies'. (My emphasis—*C.S.*)

Important here is the difference between the working class and other revolutionary classes in history. When Lenin says that the only weapon of the working class is organization, he means that whereas the rising bourgeoisie, for instance, developed its own economy, its art, its religion, its schools, its philosophy, and so on, as the expression and organization of its social consciousness, **before** the political overthrow of the feudal political system, the proletariat does not construct the institutions of the new society within capitalism (despite the Fabians and the New Left). Capitalism is the only system of production in history whose inner dynamism has pushed it to develop the productive forces incessantly and to drive out all other forms of production. In order to mobilize for the overthrow of feudalism, it was sufficient for the bourgeoisie and its allies

to recognize and feel the political restrictions upon their growing economic and cultural strength. Their own organic development within feudalism drove their 'own' institutions into conflict with the political regime which prevented their natural expansion. But bourgeois power is total social power: capital dominates all relationships like an elemental natural force. In order to seize in consciousness the nature of this power and to organize for its overthrow, there is necessary a **scientific** consciousness of the whole system of social relationships, and not just a sense of the degradation and exploitation suffered in the process of production, or the abstract knowledge that planned production for use would be more reasonable. There is no repository of this consciousness, and no guarantee of its necessary constant development in theory and practice, other than the proletarian party. To talk about the working class 'itself' as an undifferentiated, potentially revolutionary whole is to substitute myth for reality.

Because it is exploited in an inhuman system, commandeered and degraded in the service of capital, the working class is unevenly developed, apathetic under most circumstances, split into different sections, often backward in its view of most cultural and social problems, unless there is a conscious leadership differentiated from the class itself, not at the daily service of capital, determined to explode the **false** consciousness in which men grasp reality under capitalism. Abdication from the responsibility of constructing such a leadership, under the guise of 'faith in the workers themselves' is capitulation to the forces that numb the consciousness of the working class—the institutions of capitalist society itself. The centralized party is needed by the working class, then, for the purpose of 'breaking up the unity based on traditional ideology, without which the new force (the working class) would be unable to gain awareness of its own independent personality'. (Gramsci). The working class cannot make do, like the bourgeoisie in its revolutionary period, with a crude empiricism or idealism. Because the whole of the capitalist structure must be grasped in consciousness and because this whole and its laws of development are different from the immediate consciousness and experience of the proletariat, **dialectical** theory, advanced theory based on the notion of developing contradictions in the material world, is the basic element of revolutionary theory. Marx's achievement was to show the working class a mode of action based on this dialectical approach to history. Bourgeois thought had ceased to develop just at this point, and it took the highest synthesis of philosophical and scientific thought to make the leap forward. It is in this sense that one should understand Lenin's insistence that the programme and strategy of the revolutionary party are based on **theory**, and that this theory is brought to the working class **from outside**, from bourgeois intellectuals. The development of theory among the revolutionary workers themselves, once that leap has been made is, of course, a necessity for any revolutionary party. So long as the working class is not mobilized by a Party based on such a theory, its consciousness remains determined by bourgeois culture, a culture which leads man to see society as a set of separate things, not open to his own control and overthrow, but naturally fixed and with independent reality. Marxist theory explains, on the other hand, that the world of men is a manmade world, that

the powers standing over men are products of labour, and that if the whole system of labour-exploitation is abolished, man will become free, will dominate social reality instead of being at its mercy. A revolutionary party is one whose strategy and tactics flow from this total conception. Without it, the working class struggles only against partial features of bourgeois domination and, unable to see their connection, tends to fall back after partial victories and defeats.

Revolutionary Crises and the Vanguard Party

Of course, the building of a leadership capable of theoretical firmness and of combating those tendencies in the Labour movement which reflect other classes, is not the whole of the task by a long way. The actual organization in a revolutionary crisis, the rapid changes of tactics necessary, the planning of insurrection and military operations, all this quite clearly requires centralized authority and discipline of the highest order, and only a leadership developed over a long period will be capable of the task. While this phase of the development of the working-class leadership is not our immediate subject, a few general points should be made here. Certain ‘anti-vanguardist’ groupings, such as that represented by the journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*, put forward the idea that the nearer the revolution approaches, and the more the working class itself fills the historical stage, so the leadership ‘must prepare its own dissolution’. It is difficult to see exactly what this can mean but at best it probably means that as the class itself approaches revolutionary consciousness, the leadership can safely quit the scene. Of course, the outstanding characteristic of revolutions is the entry of the broadest masses into political action, but that is a very different notion from supposing that consciousness of the historical process is clearly fixed in the minds of the people. The possibility of victory in such crises depends above all on the preparation of a leadership, and is inextricably bound up with the earlier phases discussed in this article. Those masses intervening in revolutionary actions are what Lenin called the untrained, undisciplined, undirected forces. The depth of the crisis arouses tremendous force, but the great task of the party, the ‘disciplined, trained units’ is to give this force its maximum results, to make sure that it is not broken against a wall, dissipated in useless channels, and so on. Rosa Luxemburg, whose shabby ‘friends’ emphasize her weakest point, and are incapable of learning from her strength, encountered this dilemma in January, 1919. The working class of Berlin was led by rioters and provocateurs to expose itself to bloody repression by the Social-Democratic government; the young Communist Party had had no time to organize the insurrection or to knit together its followers in the rest of Germany. Such a situation could confront the most mature leadership; and the correct lead to the workers would be to sound a tactical retreat, as the Bolsheviks did in the ‘July Days’ of 1917. But the German Communists lacked the authority and the confidence for such a lead, and the suppression of the Berlin riots was only the beginning of the terrible carnage of 1919, as workers in city after city took up arms against the government, only to be crushed and murdered in thousands.

Rosa Luxemburg had criticized Lenin's centralism and 'overstress on organization' and she had trusted a little too much to the 'organic' growth of the struggle of the working class. Even though she had realized before Lenin the reactionary tendency of Kautsky and the German Social-Democratic leadership, she lacked Lenin's political sense and initiative in seeing the need for organizational expression of the opposition tendency in European socialism. It was not a question only of the Right wing having fallen into conservative habits of distorting Marxism, but of the victory of an alien class tendency in the movement. And since the world had entered the final stage of capitalism, the construction of a leadership devoted unswervingly to the political independence of the proletariat was vital. Because this conclusion was not drawn earlier, because Rosa clung to the view that an ideological (not organizational) struggle within the movement would be sufficient to win the working class, the Left turn of the masses in November, 1918, in Germany did not result in automatic support for Rosa's Spartacists, the future Communists, but for the 'Independent' Socialists, who appeared to the masses as the Left of Social Democracy. In other words, the shift in the masses was not automatically reflected in revolutionary politics, but was 'mediated' through the existing organisations and forms of consciousness.

One of the favourite references for opponents of the centralized 'vanguard' party conception is the Paris Commune of 1871. It was as a result of the brief experience of workers' rule in that city that Marx sharpened his views on the state and revolution. It was now clear, he said, that the bourgeois state must be smashed, not 'taken over', and that the new state, the proletarian dictatorship, must be the rule of the workers themselves. Latter-day critics of Leninism hold up this picture as a contrast to the centralized 'dictatorship' of Stalin's state and Lenin's party, but in the process they make a mistake which Marx himself could never have made. The conclusions drawn from the Commune about the form of the proletarian dictatorship are not in any way the same thing as the requirements of a revolutionary party to conquer power! *Socialism ou Barbarie* and similar tendencies argue directly from the form of the future proletarian state to the character of the workers' party under capitalism. But such a party must above all be capable of action and leadership, and it is not identical with the class. We have mentioned the argument that in revolutionary situations, 'the class itself' comes to the fore, and makes the leadership more and more superfluous. Perhaps the best antidote to that argument comes from Marx himself. In a letter to Kugelmann, he made a criticism of the political leadership of the Commune which sets him quite apart from those who invoke him against the Leninists. He criticized the Central Committee of the National Guard for holding democratic elections at a time when it should have exerted its authority, prolonged its 'dictatorship', in order to crush the enemy. For this, the best proletarian elements would have to go to the front, and so a more stringent regime would have been necessary to retain revolutionary authority in Paris itself. But in the absence of a firm revolutionary leadership, it was decided that democracy must have its day; the Commune was defeated. This was only part of the consequences of lack of preparation and revolutionary organization before

the Commune (Trotsky—*The Defence of Terrorism*).

Lenin and Inner-Party Struggle

Lenin's firmness and sharpness in defending his political line and organizational discipline was derived precisely from this necessity for training a contingent which will not be 'over-run' by the irregular troops' of the revolution, and not at all to any personal ambition or dictatorial habits, as his opponents unceasingly declared. Bolsheviks are determined to base their party only on the firmest theoretical principles, and to subordinate all party work to these principles. A movement of this kind examines scrupulously all political ideas in the light of the needs of the working class and the party, and ruthlessly fights against all tendencies which divert the movement from its revolutionary path. The method of analysis is always to test these ideas against the needs of the classes in society, both in theoretical argument and in the work of the party.

In the course of the 1903 conference of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party, scene of the famous dispute between Lenin and Martov over the conditions of party membership, Trotsky and others of the *Iskra* group originally supported Lenin's political line, but found themselves driven towards the opportunists by what they considered to be Lenin's organizational rigidity. Trotsky later gave his verdict on this episode, and it is worth quoting as an antidote to those who are fond of using Trotsky's early writings about dictatorship over the party.

'It was not for nothing', says Trotsky in *My Life*, 'that the words "irreconcilable" and "unsparing" occurred so frequently in Lenin's vocabulary. Only the highest concentration on the goal of revolution, free from everything pettily personal, can justify this kind of personal ruthlessness . . . His behaviour seemed to me inadmissible, terrible, shocking. Yet at the same time it was politically correct and therefore indispensable from the point of view of organization.'

It is in this very important sense that the lessons of building the Bolshevik Party are lessons for all revolutionaries. The whole method of building the party politically is involved. Lenin, who had agreement with Martov on political questions at the beginning of the Congress, quite agreed that his difference over the rules was a small one. It became important in the course of the Congress, as it became clear that from this one opportunist formulation Martov was to fall into the hands of the opportunists. In order to preserve the narrow circle atmosphere at the head of the émigré Marxists, he was prepared to line up with the opportunists in opposition to Lenin. Lenin was not only insisting on organizational points when he hammered home the authority of the Congress and the leading role of the majority. The *Iskra*-ites, including Martov, had not gone to the Congress with a factional mandate—that would deny the supreme authority of the Congress, always so dearly cherished by Lenin—but what they did agree, on Lenin's insistence, was to accept all the decisions of the Congress.

This seemed 'innocent enough' at the time, as Lenin wrote, but once 'unfavourable' decisions(e.g., on the composition of *Iskra*'s Editorial Board) were

arrived at, the discipline was broken. Lenin, convinced that without a proletarian party of iron discipline there could be no revolution, was prepared to subordinate everything to insistence on this task. Martov's indiscipline and veering towards the opportunists was a capitulation to the bourgeois tendency in the party, the tendency which shrank from independent mobilization of the working class for leadership against Tsarism; hence a split was necessary.

Political and organizational questions therefore cannot be separated. In an epoch where the construction of a leadership of the working class is the most vital historical problem, it is exactly on the questions of concrete planning and discipline for revolutionary work that political differences became explicit. Some Marxists seem to conceive of the party as simply a contractual discipline to stop individuals from going off the rails as they react to class pressure. But it is more than that: it must become the vanguard of revolutionary action, the representative of the general interest of the working class.

In the construction of a revolutionary party, there is a constant need to strive to maintain a correct relationship between democracy and centralism. The balance of this relationship tends to change with the objective situation. During times when the revolutionary movement operates under legal conditions, as in Britain today, it is essential to have full democratic discussion on all questions concerning the working class and the party. This does not, however, mean that democracy is a free-for-all, with nothing being decided. To the Marxist, democracy is a weapon in the struggle against capitalism. Discussion is necessary to arrive at decisions upon which the activity of the party can be based.

The constant training of new leaders in the revolutionary party requires the greatest patience by the leadership. Local autonomy and initiative, allowing the leaders and the rank and file to learn from their mistakes, is essential for the branches of the revolutionary party. The more experienced the revolutionary leadership the more flexible it will be in assisting the ranks by theory and practice to understand the need for a democratic centralist party.

In such an atmosphere differences of opinion can flourish provided such differences do not set out to overthrow the programme and policy of the Marxist movement. Fundamental differences along these lines in an unfavourable objective situation generally lead to a split. Splits of this kind cannot be avoided, and a mature leadership will see to it that the experiences of such a struggle are utilized to educate a membership in the superiority of the democratic centralist method. Any premature attempt to resolve the internal crisis, based upon excessive centralism and factionalism, will have serious consequences for the revolutionary party. That is why a revolutionary leadership must be the most vigilant custodian of party democracy and the firmest defender of the discipline and rights of the party as a whole. It is the interrelationship between democracy and centralism that constantly confuses the idealist opponents of Leninist organization. In their effort to run away from centralism they embrace a theory of spontaneity and proceed to liquidate the party into the class. The Marxist's interpretation of democratic centralism is part of the fact that he derives his political conclusions

from an objective historical study of the political situation, and not only from the existing consciousness of the class. The relation between democracy and centralism to him is based upon the constant requirements of the class struggle. The great problem in Britain today is to obtain a Marxist conception of the party. Capitalist propaganda constantly seeks to equate Marxist discipline with Stalinism. When ‘Socialist’ opponents of revolutionary discipline make the same equation, they are reflecting capitalist public opinion, regardless of their good intentions in this sense they play a definite part in obstructing the solution by the working class of its most pressing need.

Theoretical Differences—Practical Consequences

One aim of this article is to make a little clearer the reasons why Marxists concentrate so much attention on theoretical discussion, even on questions which appear at times to be obscure and remote from the struggle. There are always critics who say: the important thing is to get on with the struggle and get away from this arid and doctrinaire wrangling.

A good example is the ‘Russian question’. The nature of Soviet society is a vital question for Marxists and it can only be studied historically. After the Khrushchev exposures of 1956 certain prominent ‘New Left’ ex-Communists said quite explicitly that Russia had dominated the Left for too long and that in future we should concentrate on contemporary British problems. There were only jeers for those who wanted to know ‘what Trotsky said in 1924’, and yet without a study of the **social roots** of Stalinism, rather than the horrified turning of one’s back on it, there could be no renewal of Marxism. Even if the 1920s in Russia seemed irrelevant to British problems in 1956, it was an essential clue to the balance of forces in the class struggle and the play of tendencies in the Labour movement of the world. Not only that, but the very existence of the USSR, its bureaucracy’s domination over great parties all over the world, and its relationship with imperialism, all the time create situations where one’s evaluation of the Soviet social system takes on immediate importance, and for the movement to leave the question open is inadmissible.

One tendency which attracts a certain number of ‘Marxists’ is that which considers the USSR’s economy to be ‘state capitalism’. Now the actual consideration of ‘State capitalism’ as a theory cannot be undertaken here, but some of its adherents illustrate very well the connection between organizational and political questions. The claim that the USSR is ‘state capitalist’ is usually accompanied by the view that American, British and all advanced capitalisms are tending in the same direction as the USSR—towards a bureaucratic, state-controlled if not state-owned industry, with the workers exploited in ever larger productive units. As in Burnham’s *Managerial Revolution* (the product of a similar breakaway from revolutionary Marxism in 1940), the tendency of such theories is to assume that this bureaucratic centralization (‘statification’, ‘managerialism’) actually corresponds to the needs of science and technique at their present level of development, that it represents a naturally higher stage than imperialism. And

so one is tempted to conclude **either** that all talk of the working class as a revolutionary force is nonsense (Burnham) **or** at least that the age of imperialism, with all the political conclusions drawn from it by Lenin, lie in the past. In the latter case what is required is a completely new analysis to tell us what sort of contradictions dominate the new society and in what sense a revolutionary class might overthrow it, whether that class is the working class, etc. What is usually done (and it is very unsatisfactory) is to cling to the idea of the working class as revolutionary while rejecting:

- a. the economic basis (capitalism and imperialism) for this; and
- b. the organizational consequences drawn by the Marxists.

As a result, we get among the ‘state capitalists’ a very abstract, general protest against tyranny and oppression, in many cases a strong leaning towards ‘anti-totalitarianism’ in the style of the cold war or State Department Socialists. Lenin’s organizational conceptions are seen as disastrous, for they paved the way for Stalin’s dictatorship, a dictatorship not **of** the working class, but **over** the working class. Bureaucracy ‘in itself’ is seen as reactionary since it offends against the idea of self-government by the working class.

Currently circulating in translation is a programmatic statement of the group around the French journal *Socialisme ou Barbarie*. This document entitled *Socialism Reaffirmed* arrives at the following conclusions:

‘Moreover, the objective existence of the bureaucracy, as an exploiting stratum, makes it obvious that the vanguard can only organize itself on the basis of an anti-bureaucratic ideology. . .

‘The main features of a political organization that has become aware of the need to abolish the distinction in society between people who decide and people who merely execute is that such an organization should from the onset seek to abolish such a distinction within its own ranks.’

In place of the concrete development of organizational forms from the specific development of stages of the class struggle and of the type of social crisis arising under capitalism, indeed reacting in a quite topsy-turvy way to the growing concentration of bourgeois state power, we have the abstract argument from general principles. Thus, the aim is workers’ rule; therefore the means, the movement, must do away with authority. But how can the working class combat alien tendencies, how can it consolidate its victories and learn from its defeats, how can it organize to crush the powerful enemy, how can it conduct the political struggle from hour to hour, without a leadership, a leadership with **authority**? All the concentration and centralization of bourgeois power, its ideological weapons and its control of leading political elements in the labour movement, all of these make more vital the need for centralized and authoritative revolutionary leadership. Somehow we are asked to accept that authority in itself is a bad thing, indeed the main enemy.

This is really a retreat from Marxism. It is not bureaucratic or authority-wielding individuals who rule the lives of men under capitalism, but the force of capital, produced by men, yet alienated from them in a structure with its own law of motion, its own imperious demands in terms of human life and effort. Our aim is not the abstract one of 'abolishing the distinction between order-givers and order-takers' but the political overthrow of the class whose interests lie in the perpetuation of the domination of capital, in order that the forces produced by man shall be at his service. For that task we need, not an abandonment of discipline and centralized authority, but its heightening to an unprecedented degree. It is nonsense to suppose that as the working class itself comes on to the political scene, its consciousness developing to new heights, the need for organization and discipline will decline. On the contrary, a more active and politically conscious labour movement will demand it all the more insistently. Just because the rise of the working class is the most universal and world-shaking of all historical transformations, against the strongest ruling class in history, so it requires a higher level of consciousness and a higher degree of organization than any previous class in history.