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Marxism, as they say, is a guide to action. One of the greatest problems for revolutionary socialists lies in conditions where not even a significant minority of workers is prepared to accept their guidance. This has been true in Britain for much of its history. The country where the founders of historical materialism spent the bulk of their active lives has been the most resistant of the main European countries to their ideas. I do not wish to discuss here the reasons for this situation, but rather to consider some of its effects upon the British marxists themselves.

Circumstances where the influence of revolutionary socialists is confined to a small minority of the working class promote the transformation of marxist organisations into dogmatic sects. This is especially so because there is a tendency inherent in capitalism for the class struggle to become separated into distinct economic and political struggles. Reformism takes shape on the basis of this separation: it seeks to achieve the improvement of workers conditions, particularly in the economic sphere, while avoiding any global challenge to capitalist class domination.

The mirror image of the reformist bureaucracy is the socialist who disdains from engaging in the everyday struggles of the

working class because these by and large accept the separation between politics and economics which I have just described. The trade unions in particular are so tainted by their subordination to capitalist society that pursuit of an effective revolutionary strategy must take place largely outside them, according to socialists of this sort. The starting point of such a strategy must be, it is claimed, to confront not one or other aspect of capitalist society, but capitalism as a whole. Until the hold of capitalist ideas on the mass of workers has been broken, it is futile to expect that any mass struggle can present a serious challenge to the ruling class. The priority is the propagation of socialist ideas, as a means of expunging bourgeois ideology. Engagement in any partial struggle is not simply a waste of time until this task has been performed, it is positively dangerous, since it serves to reinforce workers' acceptance of capitalist society and the divisions between politics and economics.

Such an argument, which I shall call propagandism, has been especially influential in Britain because of the comparative weakness of the revolutionary left here. In this article I shall try to show how in its different forms it runs contrary to the marxist tradition. It will also emerge that it is an argument which can be put forward by reformists as well as revolutionaries.

Marx, Engels and Utopian socialism

The question of Marx and Engels' relation to the great Utopian socialists – Charles Fourier, Robert Owen, the French communists of the 1840s – is a highly complex one, which cannot be dealt with adequately here. Marx and Engels, good followers of Hegel that they were, rejected as futile attempts to counterpose to existing reality models of the future socialist or communist society, which ignored the conditions under which such a society was likely to come into existence. They believed the scientific study of the capitalist mode of production to be

more fruitful than the moral critique of bourgeois civilisation. These differences do not, however, get to the heart of the matter.

The basic issue separating Marx from the Utopian socialists was that of their different views of social change. Fourier and Saint Simon were to a large extent the children of the Enlightenment. Like the great *philosophes* – Diderot, Helvetius, Condorcet, they regarded human nature as a set of dispositions which remained constant however society was organised, but which was denied full expression under the existing order. The Utopians differed from their 18th century predecessors, first in conceiving of human nature in much wider terms, including people's co-operative and loving tendencies as well as egotism and self-interest. Second, the source of oppression lay not, as the *philosophes* had believed, in the old feudal order, but in *any* society based on private property and competition. Only where the means of production were collectively owned and controlled could man realise himself. The socialists, however, continued to believe that social change was essentially a battle of ideas – history for them was, in Condorcet's words, 'the progress of the human mind', a process of gradual enlightenment through which people (capitalists included) would come to see that socialism was in their interest. Mass struggles and armed insurrection were unnecessary and even harmful, the circulation of ideas would suffice to bring about socialism.

One effect of this approach was that the working class was treated as the object and not the subject of social change. The plight of the 'labouring poor' was something with which one might sympathise, the transformation of their situation was the goal of socialism, but the idea that this transformation might be a process of *self*-emancipation by the workers was quite alien to the Utopian socialists. Even when utopianism took a revolutionary form, as in the case of Babeuf and Blanqui, the insurrection was conceived of as the act of a small minority organised along conspiratorial lines acting *on behalf* of the

masses. This was in part what Marx had in mind when he wrote in the *Theses on Feuerbach*:

‘The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator himself must be educated. This doctrine must, therefore, divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.’ [1]

In other words, the utopians, who tended to explain away people’s individualistic and aggressive behaviour as simply the products of capitalist society, at the same time sought to exempt themselves from a similar process of conditioning: they represented themselves as the bearers of the socialist ideas which were supposed to dissolve rather than simply reflect existing class relations.

The *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*, directed at the Young Hegelians, who held view on social change very similar to those of the Utopians, constitute the starting point of historical materialism. Briefly, Marx argues that human nature does not consist in some fixed and unchanging dispositions, but in men and women’s ability to act upon and transform their environment through their social labour. The labour-process, always organised within the framework of social relations of production, provides the basis on which all other social activities depend; through it men and women change not only nature and society, but also themselves. To quote the *Theses on Feuerbach* again: ‘the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. It is the ensemble of the social relations’. [2] Change occurs through the class struggle, whose nature and form are determined by the prevailing relations of production. Furthermore – and it is this point which is crucial for our purposes – it is through participation in this struggle that people’s ideas are changed. It is through this that the paradox which troubled the Utopians was resolved – the transformation of society was possible because the class struggles would transform workers themselves. It is in this sense that it is right to

call Marxism a ‘philosophy of practice’. As Marx puts it, ‘the co-incidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.’ [3]

This conception of social change has two important consequences. First, socialism is identified as the self-emancipation of the working class. It is not something that can be achieved by an enlightened minority, but which only the masses can achieve through their own activity. Second, the task of socialists ceases to be merely the propagation of ideas, or even the preparation of insurrection. If people’s conception of the world can be transformed only in struggle, then revolutionaries must involve themselves in all the everyday battles of the working class.

The origins of British propagandism

‘Nothing but sects and no party.’ [4] Thus Engels summarised the state of the British revolutionary left in 1895. Britain’s industrial hegemony, the predominantly craft character of the trade unions, their political subordination to the Liberal party – these and other factors conspired to prevent the emergence of a politically independent (albeit reformist) workers’ movement in this country until the beginning of the twentieth century. Those organisations which claimed allegiance to marxism responded to this situation by, in Engels’ words, reducing ‘the marxist theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy which workers are not to reach as a result of their class consciousness, but which, like an article of faith, is to be forced down their throats at once and without development.’ [5]

The most important marxist group in Britain to emerge before the first world war and the one which Marx had chiefly in mind when writing these words, was the Social Democratic

Federation. Formed as the Democratic Federation in 1880, the SDF adopted an explicitly socialist programme in 1884, but its politics were distorted by the peculiarities of its founder, H.M. Hyndman, a Tory businessman who retained nationalist and anti-semitic prejudices after his conversion to a bowdlerised form of marxism. These prejudices were to lead to his forming the National Socialist Party in 1916 after the majority of the British Socialist Party (the name adopted by the SDF in 1912) had rejected his pro-war policies.

Hyndman remained throughout his life profoundly hostile to workers. He wrote in 1900: 'I don't mind saying that I am thoroughly disgusted with workers here in general and with our party in particular. Neither deserves to have men of our ability from the educated classes to serve them. It is a waste of life. They are not worth the personal sacrifice and continual worry.'^[6] This attitude was carried through in his contempt for the mass organisations of the working class. He told Wilhelm Liebknecht in 1897 that 'in fact the trade unions ... stand in the way of a genuine organisation of the proletariat'.^[7]

The SDF functioned as a propaganda group, spreading socialist ideas (Hyndman was a regular performer in Hyde Park, where he would appear in top hat and frock coat) and on standing candidates in local and parliamentary elections. Its internal structure, reflecting the fact that the SDF did not regard intervention in workers' struggles as important, followed geographical lines. The result was that the emergence of the New Unionism in 1889 and thereafter, when large numbers of unskilled workers were drawn into the organised movement for the first time, was ignored by the SDF even though some of its members, such as Will Thorne, the gas workers' leader and founder of the GMWU, played *as individuals* a central role in this upsurge.

Such behaviour aroused the fury and hostility of Engels.^[8] His correspondence is full of sharply critical comments on the failure of British and American revolutionaries to relate to the

mass struggles of workers, and their tendency merely to counterpose to the actual consciousness of workers the total socialist programme. Two passages from his letters on America bring out Engels' views on this matter:

‘The masses must have time and opportunity to develop, and they have the opportunity only when they have a movement of their own – no matter in what form so long as it is *their* movement – in which they are driven by their own mistakes and learn from their experience ...

‘What the Germans [most American marxists until as late as the 1930s were of German or Russian origin – *AC*] ought to do is to act up to their own theory – if they understand it, as we did in 1845 and 1848 – to go in for any real general working-class movement, accept its actual starting point as such, and work it up gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out how every mistake made, every reverse suffered was a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical views in the original programme.’ [9]

Furthermore, far from viewing trade unions as an obstacle to the development of the working class, Engels criticised the Gotha programme adopted by the German Social Democratic Party in 1875 because, among other errors or omissions, ‘there is not a word about the organisation of the working class as a class by means of the trade unions. And that is a very essential point for this is the real class organisation of the proletariat, in which it wages its daily struggles with capital, in which it trains itself, and which nowadays even amid the worst reaction ... can no longer simply be smashed.’ [10]

It was natural therefore for Engels to support the decision taken in December 1884 by a number of members of the SDF notably William Morris, Belfort Bax, Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, to break away and form the Socialist League. The split, however, was a false dawn. Eleanor Marx and her companion Aveling, Engels' closest British collaborators, soon fell away from the League, chiefly because of its infiltration by anarchists, with whom Morris sided (however much he may have disagreed

with them on other issues) on the question of refusing to stand candidates for Parliament.

The Socialist League did not succeed in breaking with Hyndman's propagandism. The statement issued when its founders split with the SDF declared:

'Our view is that such a body in the present state of things has no function but to educate the people in the principles of socialism and to organise such as can get hold of to take their due places, when the crisis shall come which will force action on us.' [11]

This insistence that the task of the Socialist League was 'the making of socialists' combined with a hostility to 'palliative' measures such as wage increases, distinguished Morris's politics in particular. In 1890 Engels complained that the League 'looks down on everything that is not directly revolutionary (which means ...): those who do not limit themselves to making phrases and doing nothing apart from that'. [12] The League made no organised intervention in the struggles which led to the emergence of the New Unionism. In March 1890 Morris wrote that

'Socialism is spreading, I suppose on the only lines on which it could spread, and the League is moribund simply because we are outside those lines, as I for one must always be ... The main cause of the failure ... is that you cannot keep a body together without giving it something to do in the present, and now, since people will willingly listen to socialist doctrine, our rank and file have nothing to do.' [13]

The two revolutionaries least affected by this abstentionist passivity so characteristic of the British left were Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling, who played an active part in the great struggles of the 1880s and 1890s – the gas workers' dispute, the dock strike, the Silvertown rubber strike and the engineers' lock-out.

Unfortunately, this example proved to be the exception, and not the rule. This is illustrated by the two most important splits in the SDF before the first world war. The first, in 1903, led to

the formation of the predominantly Scottish-based Socialist Labour Party. The SLP were principled revolutionaries, profoundly hostile to Hyndman's compromising attitude towards British imperialism. Undoubtedly, they reflected a significant advance on the SDF: one of the SLP theorists, William Paul, forcefully restated the necessity that the capitalist state be smashed, while, although very hostile to 'the labour lieutenants of capital' the SLP attached great importance to the struggle at the point of production. Following the American Marxist Daniel de Leon, the SLP advocated the formation of industrial unions to supplant the existing craft organisations; these unions would serve both as a means of fighting capitalism in the here and now, and as part of the basis of the future workers' state.

This did not, however, mean that the SLP had broken with propagandism. They tended to attach great importance to doctrinal purity and refused to evolve any strategy connecting the actual state of the working-class movement with the industrial unions they hoped to build, merely counter-posing their Industrial Workers of Great Britain to the existing organisations. Thus, while SLP members played an important role in the labour unrest of the years immediately before 1904 and in the wartime shop stewards movement, as *an organisation* the SLP functioned as a propaganda group, doing sterling work in spreading socialist ideas, but tending to adopt an extremely sectarian attitude to those outside their ranks. [14]

But the most extreme case of the propagandism displayed by all the British left before the Russian revolution was undoubtedly the Socialist Party of Great Britain, formed as a breakaway from the SDF in 1904. Then as now the SPGB preached the utter futility of any struggle which did not have as its immediate objective the overthrow of the capitalist state. Their members' activities as trade unionists were of no relevance to their work as socialists, since any attempt to improve workers' conditions under capitalism was doomed from the start. The party's task was simply and purely to make the case for

socialism, on soap-boxes, in the **Socialist Standard** and during the elections. For three quarters of a century now the SPGB have proved a sort of limit case of propagandism, demonstrating that those who are not prepared to sully their hands in the daily struggle of the working class are doomed to irrelevance.

Lenin, Gramsci and the Communist International

In the previous section, I used Engels as the touchstone for my criticisms of the British revolutionary left before 1914. There was however, one serious weakness in Engels' views on class and party. This lay in his tendency (which he shared with Marx) to treat the formation of revolutionary class consciousness as the inevitable outcome of a process of natural development. For example, he wrote in 1886 that

‘The great thing is to get the working class to move as *a class*; that once obtained, they will soon find the right direction, and all those who resist ... will be left out in the cold with small sects of their own.’ [15]

This passage, and others like it, suggest that the founders of marxism believed that the logic of the historical process somehow guaranteed the attainment of socialist consciousness by the working class. [16]

This belief underlay the theories of the party of a variety of other thinkers, including Kautsky, who saw revolution occurring ‘of natural necessity’ by virtue of the laws of motion of the capitalist mode of production, and Rosa Luxemburg, for whom revolutionary consciousness would emerge, eventually but inevitably, from the mass struggles of the class. Their acceptance of this belief helps to explain why Eleanor Marx and Edward Aveling operated in the labour movement largely as individuals, without attempting to develop an *organisation* capable of intervening systematically in workers' struggles. Edward

Thompson is perhaps right to argue that their withdrawal from the Socialist League journal **Commonweal** (a move fully supported by Engels) helped to doom the League from the start. [17] Eleanor and Aveling casually re-joined the SDF in the second half of the 1890s, a decision which reflected in part the fact that they saw their activities as taking place outside the framework of any organisation, serving perhaps to encourage the spontaneous and instinctive urgings of the masses towards socialism. [18]

Lenin's fundamental contribution to marxism lay in the fact, that without rejecting Marx and Engels' insight that consciousness is changed through the experience of struggle and that therefore revolutionaries must involve themselves in the everyday battles of the proletariat, he grasped that the working class does not automatically gravitate to socialism. He drew the conclusion that only a party which engaged in both propaganda and agitation and which was geared to systematic intervention in the class struggle, could act as the catalyst for the formation of revolutionary consciousness. This did not imply that revolutionaries should ignore the spontaneous struggles of workers – on the contrary, they should throw themselves into them, but that without a party of the requisite sort these struggles could not be fought through to a successful conclusion, namely the conquest of political power.

Such a party would have to combine firm and uncompromising attachment to revolutionary socialism, with no place for reformists and centrists, with sufficient tactical flexibility to be able to adapt itself to changes in the objective situation, and in particular in the 'living movement'. This would require three features: a scientific analysis of the world capable of accounting for and anticipating changes in reality, sufficiently deep roots in the class as to enable the party to participate in and influence mass struggles, and an organisational structure that would permit decisions based on an assessment of the objective

situation to be arrived at democratically and implemented systematically. [19]

The practical efficiency of this new model party was demonstrated in 1917. The foundation of the Communist International represented an attempt by the Bolshevik leaders not only to extend the revolution to Western Europe, but also, in doing so, to generalise the lessons of the Russian experience. Whatever the limitations and defects of this attempt – and they were considerable [20] – the early years of the Comintern represented the most serious attempt to date to build revolutionary parties which did not merely preach socialism, but sought to win mass support through their involvement in the daily struggle between capital and labour.

It is hardly surprising then, that Lenin should have aimed much of his fire in his polemic with the ‘left’ communists who refused to involve themselves in the trade unions or stand candidates for parliament at this current’s British representatives, such as Willie Gallacher (an SLPer) and Sylvia Pankhurst. **‘Left Wing’ Communism** was Lenin’s most systematic attempt to prove that revolutionaries could win the mass support of the mass of the working class. They had ‘to carry on agitation and propaganda systematically, perseveringly, persistently and patiently in those institutions, societies and associations – even the most reactionary – in which the proletarian or semi-proletarian masses are to be found.’ Further, for the working class to be won to revolution, ‘propaganda and agitation are not enough ... For that the masses must have their own political experience. Such is the fundamental law of all great revolutions.’ [21]

Therefore, the test of a revolutionary party lay not simply in its ‘class consciousness and ... devotion to the revolution’, but in ‘its ability to link up, maintain the closest contact, and – if you wish – merge, in certain measure with the broadest masses of the working people’, and in ‘the correctness of the political leadership exercised by this vanguard, by the correctness of its

political strategy and tactics, provided the broad masses have seen, *from their own experience*, that they are correct'. [22] This conception of the revolutionary party provided the rationale for the stress laid by the third congress of the Comintern in 1921 on the tactic of the united front, as a means through which communists could fight side by side with reformist workers around limited demands, so as both to prove the revolutionaries' claim to leadership in practice and draw out the lessons of partial struggles for the mass of workers.

Adoption of this model entailed for the Communist Party of Great Britain, formed in 1920 from the BSP, fragments of the SLP and other smaller groups, drastic changes in methods of work. The 1922 organisation report drawn up by Harry Pollitt and Palme Dutt advocated the creation of a 'party of a new type'. In particular, the old social-democratic form of organisation, along geographical lines, was replaced by one along functional lines, based on the workplace. These changes were designed to enable the Communist Party to operate as a combat organisation capable of intervening and influencing the outcome of workers' struggles. They laid the basis for a united-front strategy centred on the creation of the Minority Movement as a rank-and-file opposition to the right-wing union leadership. Whatever the reasons may be for the ultimate failure of this strategy, [23] the transformation of the CPGB after 1920 represented a qualitative advance for the British revolutionary left, one that took it for the first time towards a serious orientation on mass struggles. [24]

The bulk of the SLP remained defiantly outside this development, degenerating into a sectarian rump. An outstanding recent study of British marxism illustrates what happened in one area, the Vale of Leven:

'The issue was resolved principally along lines of age and temperament. The older members [of the local SLP branch – AC] are remembered by their older colleagues as "bitter as hell", "dogmatic and sectarian" and "never stuck for a virulent word",

and their inflexible orthodoxy is suggested by public statements that the workers could achieve nothing before the final collapse of capitalism – this at a time when the Vale of Leven was in greater ferment than it had been since the time of Chartism. The younger members, on the other hand, had grown up in the war years and joined the SLP simply because it was the only revolutionary organisation in the area. While the older members were considering the shortcomings of the new Communist Party, the younger ones simply pre-empted the decision and set up the Communist branch. Within two years they led the labour movement to victory in the local government elections.’ [25]

Ultra-left propagandism was not a uniquely British phenomenon. **‘Left-Wing’ Communism** was, after all, directed at its German and Italian representatives as well as Gallacher & co. The dominant figure during the early years of the Communist Party of Italy, founded in 1921 after the left wing of the Socialist Party broke away, was Amadeo Bordiga. Perhaps the ablest of the ‘Left’ Communists, Bordiga conceived of revolution as occurring when economic circumstances drove the masses towards the communist party. The task of revolutionaries was to ensure their doctrinal purity while awaiting the period of revolutionary convulsions. Bordiga was especially hostile to workplace organisation, which he argued encouraged ‘corporatism’ and economism – he opposed the organisation of communist factory cells, and argued that Soviets would be organised along geographical lines and elected on the same basis as bourgeois parliaments. He opposed any united front with social democracy, which he dismissed as merely the left wing of the bourgeoisie, and committed the same disastrous error as the German Communist Party did a decade later, arguing that there was no difference between fascism and the parliamentary regime it displaced.

This is not the place to discuss the highly complex process through which Gramsci came to challenge and supplant Bordiga as leader of the PCd’I. [26] The significance of his debate with Bordiga lies in the systematic formulation Gramsci gave of tasks

of the revolutionary party, which underlies and informs his subsequent exploration of the problem of hegemony in the **Prison Notebooks**. [27] In 1924 he complained that under Bordiga

‘the party has lacked any organic activity of agitation and propaganda ... No attempt has been made to stimulate the masses, at every opportunity, to express themselves in the same direction of the Communist Party ... The party has not been seen as the result of a dialectical process, in which the spontaneous movement of the revolutionary masses and the organising and directing will of the centre converge. It has been seen merely as something suspended in the air; something which the masses will join when the situation is right and the crest of the revolutionary wave is at its highest point, or when the party centre decides to initiate an offensive and stoops to the level of the masses in order to arouse them and lead them into action.’ [28]

Gramsci’s own conception of the party, profoundly influenced by his experience of the factory councils movement in Turin at the end of the first world war, was set out most fully at the 1926 Congress of the PCd’I in Lyons, after he had become party general secretary. He argued that ‘the party is united to the working class not merely by bonds of a “physical” character’. In other words, it was first and foremost a *part* of the working class, not an ‘organ’ (as Bordiga called it) representing it, and ‘suspended in air’ above it. The communist ‘far left’ (Bordiga & co.) saw the party, Gramsci suggested, as the property of intellectuals detached from the proletariat, the bearers of socialist theory, yet unwilling to soil their hands in the everyday struggles of the class. By contrast, ‘in our view, the organisers of the working class must be the workers themselves. It is therefore necessary, in defining the party, to stress particularly that part of the definition which highlights the intimacy of the relations between it and the class from which it arises.’ [29]

The proletarian composition and factory organisation of the communist party reflected, Gramsci argued, its tasks. These

tasks were set out in the theses adopted by the Lyons Congress, theses drafted by Gramsci with the help of Togliatti:

‘36. ... We assert that the capacity to lead the class is related, not to the fact that the party ‘proclaims’ itself its revolutionary organ, but to the fact that it “really” succeeds, as a part of the working class, in linking itself with all the sections of that class and impressing on the masses a movement in the direction desired and favoured by objective conditions. Only as a result of its activity among the masses, will the party get the latter to recognise it as “their” party (winning a majority) and then only when this condition has been realised can it presume that it is able to draw the working class behind it ...

‘37. The party leads the class by penetrating into all the organisations in which the working masses are assembled; and by carrying out, in and through these, a systematic mobilisation of energies in line with the programme of the class struggle and an activity aimed at winning the majority to communist directives.’ [\[30\]](#)

On the basis of this conception of the revolutionary party the Lyons Theses set out a set of concrete proposals for communist activity – work in the trade unions, united activity with the reformists against fascism, the development of an alliance between the northern proletariat and southern peasantry, the formation of factory committees as Soviets in embryo. Clearly delineated here is a view of revolutionary practice identical to the conception of social change upon which Marx and Engels founded the historical materialism, and to Lenin’s development of that conception in the theory and practice of the Bolsheviks. The Lyons Theses are one of the masterworks of marxist political theory, as much part of Gramsci’s intellectual testament as his later writings in prison.

A contemporary example: the RCT

Bordiga for all his failings was an able marxist who played an important role in the history of the communist movement. No one could accuse the Revolutionary Communist Tendency of either of these things. I discuss them here because they provide a contemporary illustration, in chemically pure form, of the propagandism which I have sought to differentiate from the classical marxist tradition.

The RCT began life as part of a factional grouping within the International Socialists (now the SWP) in the early 1970s, the Right Opposition. Theoretically, this faction espoused what one might call palaeo-marxism, an obsession with the letter of the marxist classics which often lost sight of the method which informed these works; politically, they advocated a version of orthodox trotskyism, were highly critical of mere involvement in the practical struggles of the day (the greatest Britain had seen since the 1920s) and argued that priority should be accorded to the formulation of the correct marxist programme; practically, they were highly suspicious of any attempt to modify the organisation's geographical structure by introducing factory branches and were afraid that an influx of workers into IS would dilute its politics (none too hot at the best of times, on their account). After an internal debate notable for its abstruseness (one of the main issues rested on the interpretation of [Capital Volume 3](#) and the IS bulletin was for a time full of simultaneous equations) IS and the Right Opposition parted company. A portion of the latter, led by the faction's most vocal theoretician, David Yaffe, founded the Revolutionary Communist Group in March 1974.

Since the RCT claim to have remained faithful to the RCG's founding document, *Our Tasks and Methods*, this text deserves brief mention. Its argument was a simple one. However great the struggles waged by workers might be (March 1974, we should recall, was the month that the Heath government was kicked out by the miners), they were still dominated by bourgeois ideology. This situation reflected the fact that no working-class vanguard

politically independent of the bourgeoisie existed. At most there was a 'potential vanguard', consisting of those 'section of the class [which] are beginning to break in a fragmented way from bourgeois ideology, and are being driven by the pressure of objective events to look for alternative political solutions to the problems they face'. These sections could 'become a vanguard capable of leading to the struggle to overthrow the bourgeois state' only when 'armed with an independent working-class programme'. The task, then, was to formulate such a programme and to 'train' the 'potential vanguard' 'around' it. That this task would not involve much practical activity, as opposed to theoretical practice, was suggested by the cover of the first issue of **Revolutionary Communist**, the RCG theoretical journal, which depicted a pile of solid volumes, Marx, Lenin, Trotsky, through which a 'potential' revolutionary would presumably have to wade before he or she could be counted one of the 'vanguard'. [31]

In hindsight it is clear that *Our Tasks and Methods* was a slightly ambiguous document, perhaps blurring differences within the new organisation. It did not rule out the possibility that at some time in the future, after the programme had been elaborated and a minimum number of cadres accumulated, the RCG might engage in the risky business of trying to relate to members of the 'potential vanguard'. Early in 1976 Yaffe decided that the time had come. At his behest the RCG adopted an orientation on 'reformist workers and at this time, the Communist Party.' [32] This 'turn to the class' as the outraged leaders of the opposition to Yaffe's new course called it, implied, among other things, abandoning some of the RCG's fine old traditions notably its propensity to concentrate its fire on other sections of the left. 'The main dangers now facing us are sectarianism,' Yaffe warned. [33] He seems to have believed that the debates rending the Communist party at the time, especially between the eurocommunists and the frenchite pro-Moscow opposition might lead to the emergence of a centrist current,

onto which the RCG could latch. A minority within the RCG leadership denounced this break with the past. When they criticised the CPGB during an anti-apartheid conference in November 1976, they were expelled from the RCG for their undiplomatic behaviour. A large portion of the membership followed them out. and so the Revolutionary Communist Tendency was born. [34]

The basic principles of the RCT have been expounded in their theoretical journal, **Revolutionary Communist Papers**, their more ‘popular’ publication, **the next step**, and a variety of pamphlets. They have not broken with the RCG’s paleo-marxism. They speak, for example, of capital’s ‘in-built tendency to collapse’ [35], and have taken over from the RCG ‘its understanding of the power of bourgeois ideology’. [36] They argue that ‘the strength of bourgeois ideology is due to the way it arises spontaneously out of capitalist production. The fundamental class antagonism which is inherent in capitalist production is obscured by the “free” and “equal” exchange that takes place between labour and capital.’ [37] The apparent contrast between exploitation in the process of production and a political system which seems to recognise the freedom and equality of citizens gives rise to the belief that the state is ‘an essentially neutral agency’. [38] It is this illusion that provides reformism with its basis. In particular, it gives rise to nationalism, to the idea that *all* the classes of a particular nation-state have a common interest that sets them against the workers and the capitalists of other countries.

It is indeed, the connection between reformism and nationalism which provides the RCT with their most distinctive political theme. They dismissed the Anti-Nazi League as an ‘all-class alliance’, arguing that it was quite wrong for the ‘radical left’ (the SWP and the IMG) to unite with the reformists against the fascists, because ‘*it is the strength of reformist nationalism that offers a potential audience*’. [39] The errors of those revolutionaries who supported the ANL reflected, according to

the RCT, their facile activism: ‘the existing level of political understanding is not a problem for the radical left – activity itself will be enough to overcome reformism.’ [40]

Counter-posed to the failings of the ‘radical left’ is the strategy of the RCT, which amounts to the purest possible propagandism:

‘The divisive and restrictive effects of reformism cannot be overcome by abstract calls for more action. It is the political independence of the working class that is at stake. Reformism can only be fought with marxism. The task of revolutionaries is not to urge workers to be better trade unionists but to train a vanguard in the working class.’ [41]

While the RCT grudgingly admit that ‘the trade unions provide a limited instrument for the defence of working-class living standards’, they are quick to stress that the ‘task of revolutionaries today is not to win the masses but to create a working-class vanguard’. [42] It follows that ‘in today’s conditions the instrument through which a marxist movement can be built is a revolutionary propaganda group’. [43]

It should be quite obvious from what I have said before that the RCT is nothing but a pre-leninist social democratic sect. Like the SDF, the SPGB, SLP & co., they have reduced ‘the marxist theory of development to a rigid orthodoxy, which workers are not to reach as a result of their class consciousness, but which, like an article of faith, is to be forced down their throats at once and without development’. I shall not waste much time with their theory, which displays a detailed acquaintance with Marx’s **Capital**, Lenin’s **Imperialism** and the **Financial Times**, but very little sense of the dynamic of the capitalist system and the changing forms this has taken over the last 150 years. In this they are faithful followers of Yaffe, whose idea of applying **Capital** to the contemporary world is the accumulation of facts which show that the rate of profit is falling and so on without trying to integrate the different trends observable today into an

analysis of capitalism as an articulated whole motored by the contradictions internal to it. [44]

Of course, the RCT does not believe that socialist revolution is inevitable, because of their healthy respect for the power of bourgeois ideology. Their account of ideology, based on Marx's discussion of commodity fetishism, while containing some elements of truth, simply ignores the fact, on which Gramsci laid such stress, that bourgeois ideological domination is something that has constantly to be organised and sustained against the resistance of the masses, the endlessly contested result of a *struggle*, not something which emerges 'spontaneously'. More serious, however, is their view of the ways in which this domination is to be broken down. It is clear that they believe that this involves primarily the presentation of the revolutionary programme to the masses. The creation of a vanguard 'requires that revolutionaries counter-pose an independent political alternative to Labour'. [45] Rather than go in 'for any real general working-class movement, accept its actual starting point as such', revolutionaries must, according to the RCT, offer workers the entire gamut of marxist politics.

'Revolutionary politics is determined not by the rhythm of the day-to-day activity of the labour movement but by taking up those issues which are objectively important. That is why such issues as Ireland and racism form such a vital component of revolutionary propaganda.' [46]

Now of course it is the duty of revolutionary socialists to make the totality of their politics – their views on everything from capitalism and imperialism to racial and sexual oppression available to workers. But it is a quite different matter to suggest that this sort of propaganda work provides the sole or primary means through which the revolutionary party is to be built. Of course, there are circumstances where all we can do is make propaganda – such was the case during much of the post-war boom. But even then revolutionaries should look for every opportunity to involve themselves in whatever struggles are

taking place .It is a fallacy to believe that revolutionaries can be ‘trained’ merely by reading books and denouncing other revolutionaries. Hegel long ago made fun of the ‘*scholastikos* who would not go in the water until he could swim’. [47]

Revolutionaries have to be prepared to get their hands dirty, to involve themselves in workers’ struggles, and if these struggles are around limited demands, which do not challenge capitalism in its entirety, and if most of the workers involved have reactionary ideas on questions such as race, the position of women and so on, then it is an excellent thing that they are drawn into action. The masses ideas, reactionary or reformist, *can only* be changed in struggle. The best training for revolutionaries is involvement in the everyday battle between capital and labour.

It is significant that I have yet to encounter in the RCT’s works one reference to the concept of the united front. As we have seen, they denounced the most important single instance of united action by revolutionaries and reformists for decades, the Anti-Nazi League, because it revealed the failure of the ‘radical left’ ‘*to grasp the need to fight reformism as part of an anti-fascist strategy*’. [48] The whole point of the united front is that it is a method of fighting reformism, as Gramsci put it, ‘political activity (manoeuvre) designed to unmask so-called proletarian and revolutionary parties and groups which have a mass base’. [49] By seeking to unite with reformists around limited and partial demands, we try to show who are the most effective fighters for these demands, not because we believe that their achievement would solve the problems facing workers, but as a means of exposing the unwillingness of reformist leaders to fight for workers’ interests and of winning their supporters to our own ranks. To reject the tactic of the united front above all in a period such as the present is to abandon serious revolutionary politics.

The RCT’s politics amount to a reversion to the ideology of the Enlightenment and of utopian socialism (the comparison is not intended to belittle the great French thinkers of the 18th and

19th centuries.) This group believes, like the *philosophes* and the utopians, that social change can be reduced to a battle of ideas. Just as Helvetius and Condorcet saw ‘superstition’ (organised religion) as the main obstacle to progress, so the RCT attribute magical properties to bourgeois ideology. They believe that the revolutionary party can be built by purely ideological struggle and effectively abstain from involvement in ‘the living movement that is taking place under its very nose’. They are a sect with as much relevance to the contemporary labour movement as J.M. Hyndman in his topper and frock coat.

Reformism and Propagandism

I have devoted so much attention to the RCT not because I believe that they are of any intrinsic importance but because I believe they represent in its purest form quite a widespread tendency on the British left. The RCT are revolutionaries – they accept the need for a leninist party (although they are sometimes a bit vague, talking about a ‘marxist movement’) and for the forcible overthrow of the bourgeoisie. Many socialists who belong to the no man’s land between the revolutionary left and organised left reformism (the CP and the Labour Left) however share the RCT’s insistence on the priority of ideological struggle.

One example of this tendency is the concept of ‘pre-figurative politics’ popularised by Sheila Rowbotham and the other contributors to **Beyond the Fragments**. The idea is that socialist forms of organisation and struggle in the here and now must contain, in their essentials, the structure of the future society. Any failure to do so will merely reproduce bourgeois relations of domination and subordination.

The kernel of truth in the argument for ‘pre-figuration’ lies in the fact that the conquest of power cannot be a blanquist putsch

but must base itself on forms of organisation which can provide the essence of the workers' state – Soviets. [50] Gramsci's first major political insight, during the struggles of 1918–20, was to grasp that the shop-floor factory committees represented in embryo the Soviets. It is the tendency for mass struggles to produce organisational forms based on the point of production and uniting the workers irrespective of race, sex or section which makes the dictatorship of the proletariat possible. Socialism is prefigured in the workplace, in different, usually limited and inadequate, but nonetheless real forms through which workers unite against their employers.

It is certainly both necessary and desirable that in their propaganda and (as far as possible) their methods of work socialists should offer a concrete and credible picture of what a classless society would be like. But it is just silly to suggest that in itself this will create an audience for socialist politics. We need to connect our ideas to the everyday aspirations and worries of working people. This will not happen unless they have a reason to listen to us, unless we are prepared to show that we can fight around the issues which people regard as of primary importance. In practice this means engaging in what some socialists regard as the tedious struggle about wages, the right to work, the cuts and so on. If we are not prepared to do this, then socialism is at a dead end, and will turn in upon itself – indeed, the conference called by the authors of **Beyond the Fragments** last autumn suggests that this is precisely what is happening to the 'pre-figurative' socialists. Sick of the hum-drum trade-union struggle, the casualties of the last decade retreat into psychotherapy, astrology and tailing the Labour Left.

'Pre-figurative' socialism indeed, is merely a specific form of a widespread phenomenon on the European left. This is the insistence that ideological struggle is separate from, and must precede, political and economic struggle. Such is the credo of that peculiar brand of left (and often not so left) reformism known as 'eurocommunism'. Only when bourgeois ideological

hegemony has been shattered, the theoreticians of the western communist parties claim, can there be any question of a struggle for political power. Furthermore, the establishment of socialist hegemony renders armed insurrection unnecessary – or so Santiago Carrillo argues in **Eurocommunism and the State**: once the ‘ideological state apparatuses’ have been captured, the political institutions of bourgeois rule will slip easily into the hands of the working class and its allies. In the meantime the economic class struggle is at best a diversion from, and at worst an obstacle to, the dissemination of socialist ideas, which involves the establishment of a ‘broad democratic alliance’ with non-proletarian forces ready to bolt back into the bourgeois camp at the slightest sign of working-class ‘sectionalism’.

Eurocommunism’s irreparable defects as a strategy for achieving socialism have been demonstrated so definitively that I shall not trouble myself with them here. [51] I am concerned solely with the claim that the battle of ideas must take precedence over the struggle at the point of production and confrontation with the bourgeois state. If this simply meant that socialist revolution can only succeed with the active support of the majority of the working class then there would be nothing to argue about – Lenin said as much long ago. But there is more at issue: the eurocommunists are claiming that working-class consciousness will be changed in isolation from (and indeed in opposition to) the everyday economic struggles. As we have seen, this is a notion that is quite alien to the marxist tradition. Nor is it even plausible. Are workers really likely to shake off the immense burden of traditional conceptions unless they engage in mass struggles which bring them into conflict with the employers and the state? Propaganda can persuade individuals and strengthen the convictions of the already committed; it can act as a powerful reinforcement when workers are already beginning to challenge bourgeois ideology. But for the *masses* it is their practical experience which is the decisive element in changing consciousness.

Justification for the Eurocommunist case is usually sought in a false and reformist reading of Gramsci's **Prison Notebooks**. [52] Indeed far from isolating ideological from political and economic struggles, Gramsci argues that implicit in the practice of the different classes within the process of production were the conceptions of the world corresponding to and expressing their interests. The source of socialism, then, as a set of ideas, lay in the position of workers at the point of production. But the ideological hegemony of the bourgeoisie was a result of the superimposition of their conception of the world on that of the proletariat. The result is that

‘one might almost say that he [the ordinary worker – AC] has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one that is implicit in his activity and which in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the world; and one, superficially explicit or verbal, which he has inherited from the past and uncritically absorbed. But this verbal conception is not without real consequences. It holds together a specific social group, it influences moral conduct and the direction of will, with varying efficacy but often powerfully enough to produce a situation in which the contradictory state of consciousness does not permit of any action, any decision or any choice, and produces a condition of moral and political passivity.’

[53]

Often the workers' 'contradictory consciousness' leads to a conflict between the reformist ideology that binds them to the existing order and the militancy that they display in their practical struggles. This contrast

‘signifies that the social group in question may indeed have its own conception of the world, even if only occasionally and in flashes – when, that is, the group is acting as an organic totality. But when this group has, for reasons of submission and intellectual subordination, adopted a conception which is not its own but which is borrowed from another group; and it affirms this conception verbally and believes itself to be following it, because this is the conception which it follows in “normal times” – that is when its

conduct is not independent and autonomous, but submissive and subordinate.’ [54]

Here is a reason of fundamental importance for conceiving marxism to be a ‘philosophy of practice’. The everyday struggles of the class do not merely help to undermine bourgeois hegemony – they serve to bring to the surface a socialist conception of the world that is normally suppressed and concealed. That is why the dismissal of wages-struggles as ‘economistic’ by both the ultra-left sects and the euro-communists is so fundamentally wrong. Gramsci, supposedly the intellectual father of eurocommunism, is in reality closer to Rosa Luxemburg, insisting with her that it is participation in mass struggles, irrespective of whether they are around economic or political demands, that trains workers to act as a ruling class.

Conclusion

The mechanical separation of ideological from political and economic struggles characteristic of reformists, ‘pre-figurative’ socialists and propagandist sectlets is not merely an intellectual error. It is a reflection of the problems socialists face throughout western Europe at the current period. The great economic battles which shook Britain, France, Spain, Portugal and Italy in the late 1960s and the early 1970s did not seriously undermine bourgeois domination in those countries. Widening economic struggles did not of necessity lead to political clarification, as most revolutionaries believed they would. In retrospect, this is hardly surprising – workers were reluctant to abandon the ‘old house’ of reformism when the revolutionary alternative was tiny, predominantly petty-bourgeois, and usually wildly ultra-left. Lenin used to quote Cherneyevsky’s saying that ‘political activity is not like the pavement of the Nevsky Prospekt’ (broad and straight). The class struggle does not unfold in a straight line; rather it describes a spiral, with retreats and advances.

In a time of temporary retreat such as the present, ‘ideological struggle’ seems more attractive than the difficult and time-consuming business of connecting socialist politics with workers in struggle, especially where the latter’s numbers are small and the issues involved seem (to the intellectual from the comfort of his armchair) trivial. In reality, the apparently straight road offered by propagandism leads either to sectarian irrelevance or (more likely in present circumstances in Britain at least) into the Labour Party. No doubt those who make the second choice will justify their action by claiming that it is the only effective way to combat the hold of labourism on workers. But this hold will only be broken through the united action of reformists and revolutionaries, on the picket-line and in the workplace, against the employers and the state. Anything else is nothing but an evasion, an abdication – the road to socialism lies through the practical struggles of workers. Those who want to join us on this road know where to find us.

Notes

1. K. Marx and F. Engels, **Collected Works**, Vol. 5 (London 1976), p. 4.

2. **loc. cit.**

3. **loc. cit.**

4. K. Marx and F. Engels, **Selected Correspondence** (Moscow 1975) (hereinafter **MESC**), p. 452.

5. **Ibid.**, p. 448.

6. Quoted in R. Challinor, **The Origins of British Bolshevism** (London 1977), p. 14.

7. Quoted in Y. Kapp, **Eleanor Marx**, Vol. 2 (London 1976), p. 56.

8. As will become clear in the following section, I do not regard Engels as in any sense infallible. Edward Thompson is entirely justified in his criticisms of Kapp’s book, which he says ‘is not an objective study’ because of its slavish adherence to Engels’ political judgements and ‘does not fulfil the promise of the first volume’ (on

Eleanor's life up to 1883) – see E.P. Thompson, *English daughter*, **New Society**, 3 March 1977. Kapp's frequent, often intrusive, and sometimes irritating and sententious comments reflect her orthodox Moscow communism.

[9](#). **MESC**, pp. 374, 377.

[10](#). **Ibid.**, p. 275.

[11](#). E.P. Thompson **William Morris** (London 1977) p. 380.

[12](#). **Ibid.**, p. 390.

[13](#). Quoted in Kapp, pp. 366–7. Thompson (pp. 366–589) provides a detailed account of the Socialist League's abstentionism, purism and propagandism.

[14](#). It perhaps symptomatic of Raymond Challinor's political judgement that in his book, which is devoted to proving that the SLP were the authentic revolutionary party in Britain, that he cites Ruth Fischer, that prize ultra-left phrase-monger, in support of his accusation that the early CPGB was reformist. This is not to dismiss the SLP's contribution as entirely negative, but their significance is given a more balanced assessment by Stuart Macintyre in his important **A Proletarian Science** (Cambridge 1980).

[15](#). **MESC**, p. 376.

[16](#). Marx and Engels' views on the party are discussed at length in H. Weber, **Marxisme et Classe Conscience** (Paris: 1976) and J. Molyneux, **Marxism and the Party** (London 1978).

[17](#). Thompson, *English daughter*.

[18](#). Kapp records this decision (pp. 650–55) as casually as Eleanor and Aveling seem to have taken it.

[19](#). See Molyneux, Weber and also T. Cliff, **Lenin**, 4 vols. (London 1975–9).

[20](#). See Cliff, Vol. 4.

[21](#). V.I. Lenin, **Collected Works**, Vol. 31 (Moscow 1966), pp. 53,93.

[22](#). **Ibid.**, pp. 24–5.

[23](#). See M. Woodhouse and B. Pearce, **Communism in Britain** (London 1976) and R. Hyman and J. Hinton, **Trade Unions and Revolution** (London 1975).

- [24.](#) See J. Hinton, **The First Shop Stewards Movement** (London 1972).
- [25.](#) Macintyre, p. 237. See also the same author's study of the Vale of Leven and two other strongly Communist areas, **Little Moscows** (London 1980).
- [26.](#) See the editors' *General Introduction to A. Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (London 1971).
- [27.](#) On the continuity of Gramsci's thought, see C. Harman, [Gramsci versus eurocommunism](#), **IS** (old series) 97 and 98.
- [28.](#) A. Gramsci, **Selections from Political Writings, 1921–1926** (London 1978), p. 198.
- [29.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 314–15
- [30.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 367–8.
- [31.](#) See *Our tasks and methods*, **Revolutionary Communist**, No. 1, January 1975.
- [32.](#) D. Yaffe, *A turning point*, appendix to **Revolutionary Communist Papers** (hereinafter **RCP**), No. 1, March 1977, p. 45.
- [33.](#) **Loc. cit.**
- [34.](#) See **RCP**, No. 1, for their opposition's version of events. The RCG seems, either then or subsequently, to have adopted a stages theory according to which national liberation struggles are distinct from and must precede the struggle for socialism, and argue that it is 'national-chauvinist' for British marxists to criticise anti-imperialist movements such as the ANC of South Africa or ZANU-PF. One RCGer who suggested at a meeting I spoke to that the (ultra-stalinist) South African Communist Party was not a revolutionary party was given an admonitory note by her comrades correcting her and no doubt sent off to write 'the SACP is a revolutionary party' a hundred times afterwards.
- [35.](#) **The Next Step**, October 1980.
- [36.](#) C. Davies and J. Harrison, *A retrograde step for the marxist movement*, **RCP**, No. 1, March 1977 p. 3.
- [37.](#) F. Richards, **Under a National Flag** (London 1978), p. 8.
- [38.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 9.
- [39.](#) **Ibid.**, pp. 20, 12.

- [40.](#) T. Allen, G. Evans, M. Freeman, K. Marshall, *The recession: capitalist offensive and the working class*, **RCP**, No. 3, July 1978, p. 40.
- [41.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 42.
- [42.](#) M. Freeman and K. Marshall, **Who Needs the Labour Party?** (London 1978), p. 34.
- [43.](#) S. Norton and K. Thompson, **The Struggle for a Revolutionary Propaganda Group** (London 1977), pp. 10–11.
- [44.](#) cf. Chris Harman’s article in this issue of **International Socialism** for a critique both of this position and of the quasi-Keynesian arguments used to support it.
- [45.](#) Freeman and Marshall, **loc. cit.**
- [46.](#) Allen, Evans, Freeman, Marshall, p. 43.
- [47.](#) G.W.F. Hegel, **Lectures on the History of Philosophy** (London 1968), Vol. 3, p. 428.
- [48.](#) Richards, p. 16.
- [49.](#) Gramsci, p. 373.
- [50.](#) L. Trotsky, **History of the Russian Revolution** (London 1967), Vol. III, p. 41.
- [51.](#) See C. Harman, **Eurocommunism, the state and revolution**, **IS** (old series) 101.
- [52.](#) See Harman, *Gramsci versus eurocommunism* and P. Anderson, *The antinomies of Antonio Gramsci*, **NLR** 100.
- [53.](#) Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, p. 33.
- [54.](#) **Ibid.**, p. 327.

