Discussion

Leninism versus proletarian self-emancipation

Norman Geras argues (RP6, pp20-22) convincingly that Marx's theory of socialist revolution is grounded on the fundamental principle that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the work of the working class itself'. Marx held to this view throughout his entire forty years of socialist political activity, and it distinguished his theory of socialist change from that both of those who appealed to princes, governments and industrialists to change the world for the benefit of the working class (such as Buonarotti, Blanqui and Weitling).

Marx saw that the very social position of the working class within capitalist society as a non-owning exploited wealth-producing class forced it to struggle against its capitalist conditions of existence. This 'movement' of the working class was implicitly socialist since the struggle was ultimately over who should control the means of production, the minority capitalist class or the working class (as society as a whole)? At first, Marx believed, the movement of the working class would be unconscious and unorganized but in time, as the workers gained more experience of the class struggle and the workings of capitalism, it would become more and more consciously socialist and democratically organized by the workers themselves. The emergence of socialist consciousness out of the daily class struggle of the workers could thus be said to be 'spontaneous' in the sense that it would require no intervention by people from outside the working class to bring it about (not that such people could not take part in this process, but their participation was not essential or crucial); socialist propaganda and agitation would indeed be necessary but this would come to be carried out by workers themselves whose socialist ideas would have been derived from an interpretation of the class experience of capitalism.

In short, it was Marx's view that the working class would gain 'spontaneously' in the course of their struggle with the capitalist class, the confidence in their own ability and the degree of understanding and democratic self-organisation needed to carry out the socialist revolution. The end result would be an autonomous, independent movement of the socialist-minded and democratically-organized working class aimed at winning control of political power in order to abolish capitalism. As Marx put it, 'the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority'.

(This in fact was Marx's conception of 'the workers' party'. He did not see the party of the working class as a self-appointed elite of professional revolutionaries, as did the Blanquists, but as the mass democratic movement of the working class to capture political power with a view to establishing Socialism, the common ownership and democratic control of the means of production.)

Geras speaks of this process as the 'education' of the working class, not in the sense of being taught by people from outside their class but in the sense of them 'learning' in the course of their own struggles, to organise themselves democratically and to do without capitalist ideas and leaders. Geras adds 'this education of the proletariat is part and parcel of the socialist revolution which would be unthinkable without it' (my emphasis). Undoubtedly this was Marx's view. But was it Lenin's? Here Geras becomes less convincing as he tries to argue that it was.

Lenin, as is well known, in his pamphlet What Is To Be Done?, written in 1901-2, declared:

The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own efforts, is able to develop only trade union consciousness, i.e. the conviction that it is necessary to combine in unions, fight the employers and strive to compel the government to pass necessary labour legislation etc. The theory of Socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical and economic theories that were elaborated by the educated representatives of the propertied classes, the intellectuals.

Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers only from without; that is, only from outside of the economic struggle outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers.

The spontaneous working-class movement by itself is able to create (and only creates) only trade unionism, and working-class trade-unionist politics are precisely working-class bourgeois politics.

Lenin went on to argue that the people who would have to bring 'socialist consciousness' to the working class 'from without' would be 'professional revolutionaries', drawn at first mainly from the ranks of the bourgeois intelligentsia. In fact he argued that the Russian Social Democratic party should be such an 'organisation of professional revolutionaries', acting as the vanguard of the working class.

According to Geras, Lenin's view that the workers on their own are capable only of producing a 'trade union consciousness' is 'a thesis he soon abandoned'. Evidence to refute this claim will be offered later, but one thing can now be stated with certainty: Lenin never abandoned its corollary, the theory of the vanguard party.

The task of his vanguard party, to be composed of professional revolutionaries under a strict central control, was to 'lead' the working class, offering them slogans to follow and struggle for. It is the very antithesis of Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation.

The theory of the vanguard party has a curious history. Lenin did not invent it; it was already current amongst the pre-Marxist Russian revolutionaries and was held by Lenin himself even before he embraced Marxism - or, rather, some of Marx's views. The group Lenin had previously belonged to had been influenced by the ideas of the Russian Blanquist, Tkechev. Lenin's choice of the title What Is To Be Done? was also significant since this was the title of a novel by Chernyshevsky who Lenin admired and who also favoured a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries. This idea seems first to have been introduced into the Russian anti-Tsarist movement in the 1850s by the poet Ogarev, a collaborator of Alexander Herzen. Ogarev had been greatly impressed by Buonarotti's Conspiracy of the Equals (which advances the view, quoted by Geras in his article, about the workers being so demoralized by capitalism that they would be unable to liberate themselves and so would have to be liberated by some enlightened minority). In fact, what is the vanguard party of professional revolutionaries but the modern form of the 'secret society' favoured by Buonarotti, Blanqui, Weitling and the others (revolutionary nationalists as well as utopian communists), and rejected so decisively by Marx even in the 1840s?)
Even if Lenin did abandon his view that, left to themselves, the workers are only capable of acquiring a reformist, trade unionist consciousness, his theory of the 'vanguard party' is enough to demonstrate that he did not hold Marx's theory of proletarian self-emancipation. But we promised to try to show that Lenin never did in fact abandon the views expressed in *What Is To Be Done*.

One implication of the Marxist theory of proletarian self-emancipation is that the immense majority of the working class must be consciously involved in the socialist revolution against capitalism. "The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority of the population, in the interest of the immense majority", as Marx put it. 1

Now the Bolshevik coup in November 1917, carried out under the guise of protecting the rights of the Congress of Soviets, did not enjoy conscious majority support, at least not for Socialism, though their slogan 'Peace, Bread and Land' was widely popular. For instance, elections to the Constituent Assembly, held after the Bolshevik coup and so under the Bolshevik government, gave them only about 25 per cent of the votes.

John Reed, a sympathetic American journalist, whose famous account of the Bolshevik coup *Ten Days That Shook The World*2 was commended by Lenin in a foreword, quotes Lenin as replying to this kind of criticism: "In the speech he made to the Congress of Peasants Soviets on 27 November 1917:"

*If Socialism can only be realised when the intellectual development of all the people permits it, then we shall not see Socialism for at least five hundred years... The Socialist political party - this is the vanguard of the working class; it must not allow itself to be halted by the lack of education of the mass average, but it must lead the masses, using the Soviets as organs of revolutionary initiative...* (p415. Reed's emphasis and omissions)

Compare this with the passage, quoted by Geras, from the utopian communist writing: '{"to want to wait ... until all are suitably enlightened, would mean to abandon the thing altogether!'}: Not of course that it is a question of 'all' the workers needing to be socialists before there can be Socialism. Marx, in rejecting the view that Socialism could be established by some enlightened minority, was merely saying that a sufficient majority of them would have to be.

Lenin himself admitted, 3 to establish state capitalism. There is evidence in his last articles written in 1923 6 that Lenin was beginning to believe that he had not himself laid down a correct method of seizure. His 'Ten Days' speech, for instance, J B Sanderson, *An Interpretation of the Political Ideas of Marx and Engels*, Longmans, 1969: Full revolutionary consciousness was thus the destination of the proletariat, and indeed their numbers could only be decisive when they were (as Marx put it in 1864) 'united by combination and led by knowledge', when they were, in effect, transformed into a gigantic political party. (p85)

*What Is To Be Done*, FLPH, Moscow, no date.


*Left-Wing* Childishness and Petty Bourgeois Mentality, which appeared as a series of articles in Pravda, on May 9, 10 and 11, 1917, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968

*Lenin's Last Letters and Articles*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, no date.

*The Russian Revolution of 1917: A Personal Record* by N. N. Sukhanov, translated and edited by Joel Carmichael, Q.U.P.

**Laing’s social philosophy**

Unfortunately, like most Marxists (in my experience), Joe Harrington ("Laing's Social Philosophy" RH4, pp10-16) seems to feel threatened by anything in the nature of mysticism, and in order to protect himself, creates a caricature of the thing in question, which he then proceeds all to easily to

Adam Buick

NOTES

1 The Communist Manifesto, Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954, p64


3 What Is To Be Done, FLPH, Moscow, no date.


5 See, for instance, *Left-Wing* Childishness and Petty Bourgeois Mentality, which appeared as a series of articles in Pravda, on May 9, 10 and 11, 1917, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1968

6 Lenin's Last Letters and Articles, Progress Publishers, Moscow, no date.

7 The Russian Revolution of 1917: 'A Personal Record' by N. N. Sukhanov, translated and edited by Joel Carmichael, Q.U.P.