

Class

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Consciousness

and the

Leninist Party



*Ernest Mandel*

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*This is the text of the speech made by Ernest Mandel, the Secretary of the Fourth International, at the Lenin Centenary Meeting organised by the International Marxist Group in London on 22 April 1970.*

**Introduction by K. HARDY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Today, once again, the radicalised youth all over the world are becoming interested in the questions of revolutionary theory and revolutionary organisation. In certain countries, these youth have already gone through a certain degree of experience on the question of organisational tasks. For instance, they have seen the birth, the development and the final collapse of such loosely knit, all-inclusive and broad-based organisations like the S. D. S. in Germany and the S. D. S. in the United States. Some of those who were disillusioned by their experience have made a 180 degree turn and begun to advocate the formation of elite Commando groups. The 'Weathermen' of U. S. A. and the 'La Gauche Proletarianne' in France who have adopted these organisational forms have nevertheless failed to make any headway.

It is therefore necessary to draw a balance sheet of these experiences; to examine why these organisations failed. Fortunately a large number of these radicals have begun to take stock of their experiences. Today it is clear to most of them that the question of organisation cannot be treated lightly; that organisational questions are primarily political questions.

Both types of organisations referred to above, have one very important feature in common. That is, they were both the products of pragmatism. In other words, they were the result of empirical adaptation to the immediate situation without clear appreciation of the present stage of development. Thus it was above all politics or the lack of it that determined the structure and form of these organisations.

Time and time again we have seen how revolutionary movements are led into blind alleys by such adaptations. It was not very long ago that we were told by some 'revolutionaries' that the working-class in Europe and North America had been integrated into the Capitalist State and therefore the working class could no longer be considered the agency of social change. These empiricists confused the apparent for the real; they failed to distinguish the immediate and superficial features from the basic underlying trend.

This adaptation determined the organisational forms of political currents such as 'Provos' of Netherlands. The May-June events in France, however, shattered this myth.

The 'Workerism' of the I. S. group in Britain is another such adaptation. Their paper, the 'Socialist Worker', specialises in giving a weekly commentary on the day-to-day, mainly economic, struggle of the working class. This adaptation is based on the misconception that all economic struggles automatically lead to political (i. e. revolutionary Socialist) struggles and that the working-class will always draw the necessary conclusions from each and every struggle. Such reasoning, of course, is false and in fact reminds us of Lenin's struggle against Economism. The following passage from *What Is to Be Done* sums up Lenin's attitude to this question:

"*Workers' Thought* believe that politics always obediently follows economics (and *The Workers' Cause* gives another variation to this thesis, 'in Russia, more than any other country, economic struggle is inseparable from political struggle'). These postulates of *Workers' Thought* and *The Workers' Cause* are completely incorrect, if by politics is meant Social-Democratic politics. The economic struggle of the workers is very often connected (though not inseparably) with bourgeois, clerical &c., politics, as we have already seen. The postulates of *The Workers' Cause* are correct if politics is understood as trade-unionist politics, i.e. a general tendency of all workers to secure from the government measures against the miseries characteristic of their position but which do not eliminate that position, that is, do not abolish the subjection of labour to capital. That tendency indeed is common to the British trade unionists (who are hostile to socialism), to Catholic workers, to 'Zubatovite' workers &c., There is politics and politics. Thus we see that in relation to political struggle as well, *Workers' Thought* does not so much repudiate it as worship spontaneity, its unconsciousness".

Furthermore, Lenin emphasised the need to introduce revolutionary socialist consciousness into the working-class movement; to give it a political direction. He stubbornly opposed tailism (i.e. tail ending the working-class) and the revolutionary party adapting itself to the lowest level of the struggle. Today, it is no less important to relentlessly struggle against pragmatic and empirical adaptations, because such adaptations (even those garbed in left phraseology) represent the surreptitious acceptance of bourgeois ideology.

In contradistinction, Lenin's theory of organisations was based on a thoroughgoing analysis of the basic contradictions in the Capitalist society, the sociological basis of the working class and the uneven and combined development of working-class consciousness. That is why it is important for all revolutionary Socialists to carefully study the Leninist concept of the party. In the initial stages of youth radicalisation, a large number of youth were hostile to the very idea of the Leninist party. This was partly due to an erroneous identification of the Stalinist, bureaucratized, parties with the Leninist concept of the organisation; and partly also due to the misconception that bureaucratic deformations arise from organisational rather than the social and material causes. Today, such confusion has largely been overcome and a growing number of people have begun to study the concept of the Leninist party.

Undoubtedly, clarification of problems relating to organisational tasks is absolutely essential for all revolutionaries and it is as a contribution to this process that we publish Ernest Mandel's speech on Lenin's theory of working-class consciousness and the revolutionary party.

7 November 1970

K. HARDY

## CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND

### THE LENINIST PARTY

**Y**ESTERDAY, today, tomorrow, in many parts of the world people are celebrating the centenary of Lenin's birth, but with somewhat different and disgusting spectacles. They have, as our French comrades from the Communiste League would say, put on searchlights and are preparing to burn candles around the corpse of a great revolutionary in order to placate the ruling forces of this world: in other words to explain that the corpse which they have placed on public view is after all the corpse of a very nice person, who believed in parliamentary socialism and gradualism. To apologise for him and to say that he wasn't as bad as bourgeois historians have painted him to be, and then they are quickly going to blow out the candles because even the corpse in candle-light is a bit annoying for them and their political purposes. And then they are going back to business as usual, which is this, their general reformist business of peaceful co-existence as we know it practised in France during the May events and everywhere else in the world. We do not believe that it is possible to celebrate Lenin's birthday and to be worthy of Lenin by this type of spectacle. What Lenin merits is not candles but real fires, revolutionary fires. The only way we can live, and pay tribute to Lenin's contribution to the history of mankind, is by being revolutionaries. And Lenin had that in common with Marx:—he understood the necessity of unity between theory and practice on a very high level of theory and a very high level of practice; revolutionary theory and revolutionary practice. So instead of making here this evening an agitational speech, and telling you all about what you already know—Lenin's theory of imperialism and Lenin's concept of state and revolution—I will try to dwell on what is by far his most important contribution to the development of Marx's theory, to the development of a theory which actually discovered some gaps in the writing of Marx and Engels, some non-developed parts of that theory.

In discussing the theory of revolutionary organisation I shall try to raise the analysis and the understanding of that theory to a somewhat higher level than is done generally in disputes regarding that theory, which still go on sixty years after *What Is to Be Done* has been written, and as it will probably still go on for many years. I think if I concentrate on what I could call the theoretical roots of Lenin's theory of organisation, I will also contribute to underlining and stressing his practical activity. Because that practical activity is today understood in the light of the Russian revolution, understood in the light of the creation of the Third International, understood in the light of the development of the revolutionary movement, after the degeneration of the Russian workers state and the creation of revolutionary Marxist organisation such as ours outside of the control of the ruling bureaucracy there. This continuity is in the first place essentially the continuity of this theory of organisation. Many people see Lenin's theory of organisation in the first place as some technical gimmick; they see it as some rule, some solution of having a functioning organisation which corresponds to a certain number of rules. The rule of democratic centralism is the best known and also the most discussed, but it is my contention that the theory of organisation, Lenin's theory of organisation, is not by any means an amalgam of a number of organisational rules; that its roots are much deeper. It is concerned with much more important, much more keen questions, central questions to the very concept of a socialist revolution, and of self-emancipation of the working class, and it is about these deeper roots of Lenin's theory of organisation that I would like to make some comments.

## **Lenin's Theory of Organisation and Two Contradictory Themes in Marx**

In reality, what Lenin's theory of organisation is about is essentially a theory of working-class consciousness, of the development of class consciousness; of the absence of a regular and even development in the working-class consciousness. We have to understand this theoretically, we have to try to match this theory against contending concepts and theories which were developed fifty or sixty years ago, and from which we can draw a historical balance sheet today; and we have to match them also in the light of historical experience, in the light of empirical evidence which has

accumulated over the last period. Now we could start with two very contradictory statements which are to be found in Marx's writing, which were written by Marx and which logically lead to very very different types of organisational concepts.

One exposition of the development of class consciousness; of the problems of class consciousness which you can find in the writings not only of the young Marx, but also of Marx and Engels of later years [although they became modified later, but which you still find in them] is its development more or less automatically out of class struggle. You have then a syllogistic type of reasoning: capitalism is torn, unavoidably torn, by class struggle. The working class and the capitalist class have fundamentally historically different interests, and they clash. These clashes lead to fights and out of these fights (you will find the formulae in several writings of Marx and of Engels) unavoidably working-class consciousness develops; that is to say that at a certain point in these fights, the workers organise first the trade unions and then the political parties, and then they become conscious of their interests as a class and they fight for self-emancipation. This is one line of reasoning and this line of reasoning was true of the writings of Marx and Engels. Partially at least this concept ends in a certain concept of "social democratic" mass parties (which I will come back to after a few minutes) as we knew them at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

But then you have another line of thought, of analysis which also runs through Marx's writings, especially the more mature Marx, which leads to rather opposite conclusions: and it is the concept that in every society which is a class society the ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class, and of course if it is a meaningful sentence this cannot be dealt with as meaning that the ideology of the ruling class is the ideology of the ruling class, because that would not be a sentence at all—that would be just a tautology. What Marx means when he says the ruling ideology is the ideology of the ruling class is that, of course, the ruling ideology is the ideology of all classes, and not only of the rulers themselves. And it is not difficult to understand that these two lines of reasoning lead to very different conclusions, because if it is true that the ideology of the working class under stable capitalist society is bourgeois, or petit bourgeois

then it obviously does not follow that it is sufficient to assemble the workers somewhere—anywhere on the conditions of beginning class struggle, to have them develop more or less automatically a socialist class consciousness to combat the capitalist class. You then approach the question as a much more complex, much more complicated problem, and then the whole type of reasoning which is at the basis of Lenin's theory of organisation can be understood perfectly. Let me say immediately that this type of reasoning was not invented by Lenin, that it was worked out much earlier by Kautsky and other Austrian social democrats. You can find it in the original homeland of the Austrian social democracy, so called in the manifesto which was adopted in 1889, and you can find it very clearly, I believe, in some of the later writings of both Marx and Engels. I will give just one example, a very striking example, because it has the very words which were later so strongly used to reproach Lenin when he used them many years later.

## Uneven and Combined Development of Working-class Consciousness

On January 1st 1870, Marx wrote a circular letter for the First International concerning a problem which is still on the order of the day today—the problem of working-class consciousness in Britain—and he says that some people, the later anarchists, the people who were at that time inside the First International, reproached us for our contacts with the trade-union movement inside the general council of the First International. They do not understand why we maintain these sort of relations; but, says Marx, the British capitalist class and the British capitalist press understand very well what we are trying to do: we try to introduce into this movement of the British working class revolutionary socialism, revolutionary socialist consciousness. Now these very words you will find in Lenin's *What Is to Be Done*: that is, the introduction from outside, revolutionary socialist consciousness into a class that obviously did not have that consciousness. Anybody who wants to study English history will accept that the English working class of 1870 did not have a revolutionary socialist consciousness, so this attempt, conscious attempt, made by Marx was taken up and used by the early social democrats, and

it is from that source that Lenin took some of these rather provocative sentences in *What Is to Be Done* for which he has been attacked so many times. So what this is all about is the development of class consciousness. Now, we can try to avoid seeing the problem, and try to avoid finding a road to solving it, by saying either that there is no problem, or that it has been solved, and that is an easy position. Because it is also rooted in Marx's theory, we can say that during a revolution, working-class consciousness jumps forward by leaps and bounds and can even overtake—at most times does overtake—the consciousness even of revolutionary organisations; and then you can give examples that in the Russian revolution of 1917 the revolutionary workers of Petrograd were in advance of the Bolshevik apparatus, that in the Spanish revolution of 1936 the revolutionary workers of Barcelona and other towns were in advance of all political organisations, which is generally true. I will not dispute this interpretation, but as I said before, this does not solve the problem of how to make the revolution under conditions of late capitalism.

The problem is how you work for that revolution: whether the only thing for you to do is to sit and wait till this revolution comes and then working class consciousness will make suddenly tremendous leaps forward. Once you understand especially that revolutionary situations do not occur every day, every month or every year, you are faced again with the problem as it was posed by Lenin: you have a working class which in general does not have an automatically socialist political class consciousness, which cannot have an automatically socialist political class consciousness given the conditions of life under capitalism, and which will have different and varied forms of progress towards class consciousness, developing at one time, discontinuing at another time, moving geographically in different geographical layers, different regions, different factories; structurally different stages concerning big versus small factories, certain trades as opposed to others, and so on and so forth. I think that it is undeniable that this concept of the combined and uneven development of class consciousness of the working class corresponds to historical reality and to the empirical evidence of 150 years of history of the working class. The example of England is probably the best one to analyse the mistakes which the young Marx makes—very big mistakes. There is a writing of Marx's of

And if we look at the story 100 years later or 120 years later this is even more obvious. It is obvious that this type of reasoning which draws an immediate straight line from conditions of existence to consciousness is as wrong today as it was then. I also think that if we look in an objective way at historical evidence we must accept that the uneven development and irregular movement of class consciousness proves itself nearly everywhere. I will give a striking example from France; you can give many other examples of the same type, but this was extremely striking because it was in such a short time that you had a switch in the attitude of the French working class between the months of May, 68 and June when they went to the elections. And many people tried to interpret one in the light of the other, as we heard here a

existence. revolutionary socialist conclusions out of their proletarianistic estimation of Marx, the British workers were not drawing it is obvious that forty years after this over-optimistic I wouldn't go along with this extreme statement; but working class is also bourgeois". Well, it is a bit of an exaggeration, bourgeois; the bourgeois itself is bourgeois, and unfortunately the "in England everything is bourgeois, feudals, the nobilities, concepts": he used a famous sentence of the old Marx, saying that the British working class has essentially bourgeois political he would quote what Marx was saying a few years before, "that working class around 1885, he would not write a thing like that, Forty years later when Engels would write about the English conclusions out of that situation". That was written in 1845. see how the British workers are drawing all the necessary political one as exceptionally difficult in this type of reasoning) "...we workers; I won't go into that; but the British—that is what strikes our eyes how the British...". (he also says French and German evident, and the paragraph ends by saying: "And we see before tations", and so on and so forth. All things which are of course in order to overthrow all types of private property, of exploitation, misery and burdens on its back; it is such a class that you need there: "Well, we see how capitalism creates a class that has only around 1840, in England, in France, and in Germany, and he says a paragraph describing what is happening in Western Europe, did not see that Marx had been wrong, completely wrong. It is the Mensheviks against Lenin in a very foolish way, because they 1845 which has a famous paragraph which was quoted later by

few months ago when we had a debate with Monty Johnston\*: they tried to interpret the attitude of the workers during the general strike by their attitude during elections. The whole argument is very old. We have heard the same thing in the beginning of 1919 in Germany: there were tremendous revolutionary movements setting up workers councils, setting up soviets, going near to the border of a socialist revolution in the months of November, December, January 1919; in February you had general elections; the social democrats got 43% of the votes, bourgeois parties got the rest, and the small votes cast in favour of the revolutionary tendency were completely insignificant. But does this mean that these workers who were arming themselves, who were making revolutionary street battles in the streets of Berlin, who were having demonstrations of 3,000 and 4,000 people, were in reality not revolutionaries? No, it does not mean that. It means that working-class consciousness develops exactly in this way, as Lenin saw it, and as I said before, in uneven and irregular movements. That it can make big leaps from one extreme to another in rather a short time, that it can make big spurts forward and then come back again after that, and that as long as you look at the disorganised class in general, you can have your hat turned by contradictory indications which vary if not from one day to another, at least from one month or from one year to another. How does this happen? Well, we can have several explanations for this uneven and irregular development of working-class consciousness.

The first, of course, which is by far the most important, is that masses of people do not learn from reading, masses of people do not assimilate experience and consciousness through reading or individual study; they assimilate consciousness from action and a permanently developing class consciousness has as its pre-condition a permanently active class, and a permanently active class is in contradiction with the very nature of capitalist society. It is by the nature of capitalist society that workers are forced to sell their labour power in order to survive, and therefore they cannot be on a permanent strike, and they cannot be on a "permanent" revolution. They cannot make strikes and revolutions every day because if they would do that they would starve.

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\*Ernest Mandel is here referring to a debate he had with Monty Johnston, the leader of the Dubcekite wing of the British Communist Party, on the question of Trotskyism (in 1969).

So this discontinuous nature of working-class action determines the discontinuous nature of working-class consciousness. It is only in big spurts of actions, that you have a big leap forward of consciousness, and it is inevitable that after such a big spurt forward of action you have a retreat once this action has not led to a revolutionary result. Just in passing, that is the reason, that is the missing link between the way in which class consciousness develops and the key rule of a revolution to push that class consciousness forward in a very quick way, because what characterises the revolution in opposition to normal every-day circumstances with business as usual, with day-to-day life under capitalism, is that in a revolution people become very active, and permanently active. You have demonstrations nearly every day, you have meetings nearly every day, which completely disrupt normal life, that is, normal integrated life in bourgeois society; and because of that reason, consciousness can come forward, leap forward much, much quicker than under day-to-day stable capitalist conditions.

The second reason, material reason, or if you want, materialist reason for this uneven, discontinuous and irregular development of class consciousness is rooted in the composition of the working class. The working class has a history like every class and the history of the working class reflects itself in its stratification. You have the families of the working class who are themselves descended from the urban workers, since for several centuries at least, in certain parts of the world, not in all parts (and from that point of view England and my own country, Belgium, are probably amongst the most privileged ones), where you have had actual long traditions of urban working class, of urban wage earners, for many centuries. You have other parts of the working class who are descendants of rural semi-proletarians, for a much shorter period; you have other layers of the working class who are descendants of the petty commodity producers, that is to say, land-owning peasants, self-producing farmers or small craftsmen, small artisans, small tradesmen. You have workers who are only recently urbanised as against workers who have been workers for a long period, and if you combined this historical result, the result of the history of the origin of the working class, in its relation with the ideological and cultural stratification, then you have layers of the working class who are still today under the powerful

grip of, for instance, churches. I think of the Catholic Church in countries like Italy or Belgium (the Flemish part of Belgium). You have parts of the working class who are under influence of other ruling-class, ideological currents and institutions. You have the other side of the spectrum, parts of the working class whose parents and even grandparents were already organised in the trade union movements, in the socialist movements in the social democratic movements or in other working-class tendencies. If you combine this ideological stratification with the historical and social stratification, and if you inject into that another element, of which, of course, generally Marxists do not like to speak so much, but which is unfortunately a fact: that you have also individual differences, that you have certain people who have a natural reaction to revolt against injustice and you have other people who are rather more passive when they are faced with oppression and injustice. When you combine all these social, ideological and individual differences, you will understand very clearly that it is not the problem of great theory and complicated metaphysical thought to see that parts of the working class achieved much quicker than other parts an elementary class consciousness, political class consciousness, and revolutionary socialist class consciousness. There have been some striking sociological enquiries made during the last years which confirmed this in a very clear way in the recent history of the international labour movement.

### **Sociological Roots of Bolshevism**

There is an eminent English sociologist (left, fake left, if you really want to go into that definition) called David Lane, who has written what is to my knowledge the first sociology of Menshevism and Bolshevism...but of course there are not so many facts which can be assembled on this subject. But from the facts which he has assembled from all possible sources, a very striking difference arises; it seems that the great majority of industrial workers in towns with rather long industrial traditions, big towns with big factories, were Bolsheviks. The stronghold of the Mensheviks, who had a great number of the workers, and talking of the period 1902 and 1910 and 1918—the Mensheviks had their strongholds in small type industry, in industries which are by definition not in big towns, like the mining industry or the oil industry. In discussing the dictatorship of the proletariat you will not find in *State and Revolu-*

tion a single line about the leading role of the Party as against the Soviet. It's nonsense, because that leading role was conceived by Lenin as a result of political authority, as a result of capacity for convincing workers, but not as something which has to be imposed by censorship, by violence or by repression against the mass of the people. I say that this concept which is one of a truly workers' rule and workers' state, is Lenin's concept. How can you really reconcile with this, caricature of Lenin concerning the Party as substituting itself for the working class or for the masses? If you try to make an objective synthesis between what Lenin wrote about the Party, and what Lenin wrote about workers' councils, about Soviet power and about the workers' state; you will have to admit that for him the existence of a revolutionary party, the authority of a revolutionary party, the leadership capacity of that revolutionary party, was not only not counterposed, but a precondition for a development of working-class self-activity and working-class consciousness, without which the Party could never have developed to such a degree. And here we also can make a historical comparison, because history has answered that question about substitutism, that accusation made against Lenin. Compare workers' councils in different parts of the world, because we have seen them already in different parts of the world. Compare them in the Russian towns where you have the Bolshevik majority in 1917-1920, and compare them with workers' councils which we saw in other parts of Russia where you had the Menshevik majority. Compare them with the workers' councils in Hungary or in Spain and tell the truth, where did they last the longest, where did they show the highest degree of working class initiative: where did they show the possibility of lasting for a long time, and enabling the workers to have the maximum of self-expression and self-activity? where you had a Bolshevik Party as their leadership or where the workers were relatively unpolitical, they were under the sway of social-democratic parties, under the sway of anarchist tendencies. Never before in history have we seen so much self-activity, so much self-organisation and so much initiative of workers, as in the Russian workers' councils, in the Russian Soviets, under Bolshevik leadership between 1917 and 1920-21. That is the historical answer to this question. Of course we can say afterwards it fell down, but what caused it to swerve downwards was the activity of the workers themselves. The root of the degeneration of the Russian revolution is not a

plot by the Bolsheviks; not even a plot by Stalin. The root is the growing passivity of the Russian working class as a result of all historical circumstances, which we know—hunger, isolation, defeat of world revolution, decimation of the workers, disorganisation of industry—that is the real historical root. The rule of Stalin, the power of the bureaucracy, is the consequence and not a cause of this phenomenon, so the only thing you can say is that when you don't have an active working class, you can't have self-activity of the workers or Soviets. This is rather self-evident, but what history has not shown, what it has not shown anywhere, is that the existence of a strong revolutionary vanguard party, which is a real working-class party, which has real roots in the working class, and which has gained its authority by its political capacity, is in any way whatsoever an obstruction, or an obstacle, on the road of self-organisation and self-activity of the working class.

In that sense when we say that Leninism today, that the continuity of Leninism today, lies in the Fourth International, we are conscious of the fact that by wishing, by wanting, by trying to build a revolutionary organisation, revolutionary parties, a revolutionary international, we in no way conflict, or impede the road of growing working-class activity, self-expression and initiative, but on the contrary, as we have already shown on a small scale in the case of France, we only create better conditions for a high level of self-activity, self-organisation and initiative.

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