The Importance of Bukharin’s ‘Historical Materialism’ for understanding Proletarian Revolution by Phil Sharpe

The importance of Bukharin’s work ‘Historical Materialism’ is motivated by the increasing emphasis on economic determinism that seems to preoccupy the work of contemporary Marxists.(1) The complexity of the class struggle seems to have generated support for the catastrophist view that society can be changed into socialism without the importance of human agency. This standpoint seems to have motivated interest in the conception of the falling rate of profit. We will utilise the work of Bukharin in order to refute this approach. However this work seems to be an unlikely starting point for the defence of the role of human agency in history. Bukharin’s work has been considered mechanical since Gramsci’s criticism. (2) We will attempt to indicate that this is a one-sided interpretation and instead Bukharin attempts to provide historical materialist reasons for the class struggle. His approach should be utilised in order to understand the contemporary character of capitalist society.

The historical materialist starting point of Bukharin seems to be unpromising in relation to the standpoint of our perspective: “In this sense, we may also speak of the historical necessity of socialism, since without it human society cannot continue to develop. If society is to continue to develop, socialism will inevitably come.”(3) This viewpoint seems to suggest support for fatalism that expresses the possibility of the victory of socialism without human agency and will. But this is not what he means. Instead he argues that: “Socialism will come inevitably because it is inevitable that men, definite classes of men, will stand for its realization, and they will do so under circumstances that make their victory certain.”(4) Hence it is implicitly being suggested that if human beings, for whatever reason, do not express sufficient will and determination the victory of socialism may not occur. In other words the approach of historical necessity is being undermined by a formula that implies the possibility of open-ended aspects to historical development. This means that whilst the conception of historical necessity may have ontological significance that explains the character of reality it is actually diluted by the very complexity of the actual events of the class struggle. Bukharin does argue that the Marxist perspective suggests that capitalism is not a permanent form of society and it is transitory and will be replaced by socialism.(5) But this understanding is qualified by the recognition that the equilibrium between society and nature has to become one of decline for the conditions of change to develop. In periods of expanding equilibrium change of a revolutionary character is unlikely to occur. The situation of equilibrium based on the development of the productive forces or economic development is one in which the relations of production are generally in conformity with the productive forces. The political system and the role of the state, ideology and customs are also in conformity with the economic structure and the continuation of equilibrium. The conclusion that Bukharin makes from this analysis is the following: “The class psychology is based on the aggregate of the conditions of life in the classes concerned, and these conditions are determined by the position of the classes in the economic and social-political environment.”(6)

This formulation could be considered to represent a rejection of the significance of the role of ideology and the superstructure. But what is actually being justified is the viewpoint that the material conditions define the character of class consciousness. Bukharin also argues that the primary aspect of reality is the external equilibrium and the condition of the development of the productive forces. This is the basis to understand the many contradictions and tensions of society: “In considering the structure of society, i.e. the mutual relation between its parts, we may not conceive of this relation as a perfect harmony between its parts. Every structure involves internal contradictions; in every social class form, these contradictions are very sharp.”(7) Hence the situation of equilibrium would tend towards the compatibility of the relations of the various parts of society in terms of smooth functioning. However what could be defined as a situation of disequilibrium would represent the development of contradictions between the various parts of society. The implied suggestion is that a decline in the development of the productive forces would express tensions and disturbances at the level of the political. What is crucial to establish is what this would mean in terms of the role of class struggle? Bukharin outlines the importance of contradictions in terms of the inter-connections between economy, politics, the class struggle, and ideology. He concludes with the following comment: “Again we emphasize that the law of social equilibrium is a law of mobile equilibrium, that includes antagonisms, contradictions, incompatibilities, conflicts, struggles, and - this is particularly important – that it cannot dispense under certain circumstances, with catastrophes and revolutions, which are absolutely inevitable.”(8)

In other words the description of social reality in terms of the various conditions of equilibrium is not meant to deny or reject the importance of the class struggle. Instead we have the basis to understand the class struggle in terms of the given condition of equilibrium, and the related character of its contradiction. If there is an expanding equilibrium the situation is explained by a form of class struggle that is not likely to be revolutionary. This is because the contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production has not assumed acute forms. But in a situation of the declining equilibrium the development of the productive forces has been transformed into that of regression and therefore the prospect is that the contradictions within society will have become more serious and the class struggle assumes revolutionary proportions. This is not an economic determinist standpoint because it is quite possible that there are reasons why the role of the political does not correspond with the economic. Hence the aspect of the economic may contradict the activity of the political and so result in a complicated outcome. But in general the situation is defined by the movement of the productive forces: “Indeed, a progressive movement of the productive forces implies above all that a contradiction has arisen between the social technique and the social economy: the system loses its equilibrium. The productive forces have increased to a certain extent; a certain regrouping of persons must be undertaken, for otherwise there is not equilibrium, i.e., the system cannot permanently endure in its present form. This contradiction is eliminated by means of the following regrouping of men: economy “adapts itself” to the condition of the productive forces, to the social technology. But the regrouping of persons in the economic apparatus also implies a necessary regrouping of persons in the socio-political structure of society (a different combination of parties, a different alignment of the forces of the parties etc)” (9)

This very comment indicates the contradictory character of the process of equilibrium. Under certain conditions when the productive forces are in a situation of expansion it is possible to reconcile this development with the requirements of the relations of production and the interests of the political system. If the productive forces are in a condition of regression the various contradictions of the system have intensified within economic activity and in the realm of politics and ideology. The result of this situation is the intensification of the class struggle but this does not mean that the outcome is inevitably socialism. This is because the character of class consciousness is complex and so may not be adequate for the requirements of the productive forces. Instead society continues at the level of negative reproduction, as occurred during world war one. Bukharin does argue that: “Marx therefore conceives of revolution as intervening when the equilibrium between the productive forces of society and the foundations of its economic structure is disturbed; such is the content of the conflict solved by revolution; this, of course, means the transition from one form to another.”(10) The point being made by Bukharin is that he is describing the general context that would explain the historical and economic condition of the prospects for revolutionary change. However the outcome of this process is not rigidly reduced to inevitable change because the very contradictions of the economy take the important form of class struggle. What occurs is conflict between the owners of the means of production and wage labour within capitalist relations of production. Furthermore, the dominant economic class acts to maintain its condition, and so tries to undermine the attempt of the subordinate class to transform the situation. Therefore the dominant class can be dominant in politics despite the economic condition being favourable to the prospect of revolutionary change. In this context the conception of inevitable revolutionary change refers not to the immediate and concrete situation within the class struggle and instead refers to the overall prospects for capitalism. The capitalist system cannot in the long-term resist the attempt of the subordinate class to achieve revolution if the productive forces are in decline. However in the short-term it is entirely possible that the ruling class can resist the attempt of the subordinated class to transform the situation by means of revolution. Only revolutionary change at the level of the economic and political can bring about the process of transition to a higher system that represents the interests of the development of the productive forces. But this prospect is dependent upon success in the class struggle. If this does not happen then the situation will be characterised by the continuation of decay and stagnation: “Therefore: the cause of revolutions is the conflict between the productive forces and the productive relations, as solidified in the political organization of the ruling class. These production relations are so emphatic a brake on the evolution of the productive forces that they simply must be broken up if society is to continue to develop. If they cannot be burst asunder, they will prevent and stifle the unfolding of the productive forces, and the entire society will become stagnant or retrogressive, i.e., it will enter upon a period of decay.”(11)

Consequently what has been described in terms of an inevitable demise of capitalism would be more accurately understood as the possible outcome of the dynamic contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production. The ruling class that represents the relations of production do their utmost to prevent the tendencies of the productive forces being realised by means of successful revolutionary struggle. It is entirely possible that the situation is characterised by decay rather than transformation. Hence this situation implies that the subordinated class must have a strategy that is able to overcome the resistance of the ruling class. It is also necessary that the subordinated class is objectively maturing as the expression of the future society in terms of its relations of co-operative labour: “We have already seen what Marx considers as the basis of the socialist order; namely first, the centralized means of production (the productive forces) second (particularly in production relations), “socialized labour” i.e., principally the relations within the working class, the totality of the production relations within the proletariat (production bond between all workers).”(12) Thus the very expression of the capacity of the working class to oppose the ruling class is connected to its objective strength within the relations of production and the ability to express the potential of the future in terms of levels of co-operation and socialisation. The principles of the capitalist class that are based on the market, lack of organisation and regulation conflict with the planned and organised role of labour. However the superiority of the character of labour will not pre-determine the outcome of class struggle because of the very fact that the ruling class will attempt to undermine the attempt of the working class to achieve economic and political power. This means the objective strength of the working class that has been formed within the capitalist system is not sufficient for the prospect of victory. Instead the issue of the politics, ideology and strategy of the working class is vital. For example the outbreak of world war one indicated the objective maturity of the prospect of socialism but the war also led to the ascendency of nationalism and social chauvinism that undermined the internationalist connections of the world working class. Hence the subjective development of the working class is vital if the objective conditions for transition to socialism are to be realised.

Bukharin outlines his approach in the following manner: “Since men make history, the conflict between the productive forces and the production relations will not find its expression in an attack made by dead machines, things, on men, which would be a monstrous and ridiculous assumption. Obviously the evolution of the productive forces places men in a position of outright opposed situations, and the conflict between the productive forces and the production relations will find its expression in a conflict between men, between classes. For, the relations of cooperation between workers find expression in the living man, in the proletariat, with its interests, aspirations, its social energy and power. The restrictive, dominant basis of the production relation of capitalism also finds its expression in living men, in the capitalist class. The entire conflict assumes the form of a sharp struggle between classes; the revolutionary struggle between classes; the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against the capitalist class.”(13)

In other words it would seem eccentric and inaccurate to Bukharin for the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces to be conceived without the role and importance of human agency. Instead this very tension is outlined in its only possible mode of expression which is the conflict between humans for economic and political supremacy. Bukharin is assuming that the situation of the decline of the expansion of the productive forces is generating a favourable situation for the proletariat to obtain victory in the class struggle. But the very fact that a class struggle is taking place means that the possibility of triumph for the proletariat is not assured and inevitable. It is entirely possible that the ruling class will be very determined to maintain its dominant economic and political position; whilst the working class may be undermined by the influence of Social Democracy and its message of class compromise. Thus what is vital to the prospect of success is that the Communist Party obtains the majority support of the working class and so is able to promote mass action in favour of communism. If the Communist party remains a minority the ruling class may retain its hegemonic position and so be able to withstand the challenge posed by the working class. However the continuation of the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces will objectively generate the favourable possibilities of change. But in order that this development occurs it must be understood in the dynamic terms of the transformation of the consciousness of the working class: “The necessary condition for revolution is therefore a revolutionizing of the consciousness of the new class, an ideological revolution in the class that is to serve as the grave digger of the old society.”(14) It is entirely possible for a variety of reasons that the ideological situation can lag behind the objective conditions that may favour the prospect of social transformation. The working class may be supportive of the ideas of the ruling class about nation and social policy and so may not be receptive to the arguments being made in favour of the revolutionary perspective. Furthermore, the genuine Communist Party may be small and without influence and so the process of the radicalisation of the working class has not occurred. In general the Marxist world view may have only tiny support and so the workers do not conceive of reality in terms of the importance of class struggle. Hence the very low level of consciousness of the working class may enable the system to undergo limited recovery despite the continuation of the contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces.

The point being made by Bukharin is that the economic and ideological situation may not be in strict conformity. It is entirely possible that the economic situation may be in a condition of negative equilibrium whilst the political and ideological situation represents a condition that is inherited from a situation of expanding equilibrium. Furthermore, defeats in the class struggle could result in the consolidation of the ideological situation in a manner that upholds the hegemony of the ruling class and results in the adaptation of the working class to the existing system. It is also possible that the working class could support an ideology of class harmony or class compromise that was based on the preceding period of the expansion of the system when it was possible to obtain economic advances from the system without the necessity of revolutionary struggle. Hence when the system entered into a period of crisis and negative equilibrium the working class had an ideology that was inherited from the previous condition of development and economic advance. However the very crisis of capitalism promotes the prospect of ideological revolution. Only when this development has been created is it possible to generate class struggles with revolutionary dimensions and the creation of a psychology of irreconcilable opposition to the system. But in order for this prospect to occur it is necessary that an ideology has arisen that is intransigently opposed to capitalism both in periods of expansion and decline. This is the ideology of Marxism that upholds the perspective of intransigent class struggle and so attempt to challenge the ideological domination of the ruling class is periods of stability and harmony. Unfortunately Marxism made peace with capitalism in 1914 and the result was a crisis of the Socialist International which accommodated to the interests of the bourgeois nation state in terms of support for the aims of the imperialist war. Only the re-emergence of principled Marxism meant that the crisis of the system could generate an ideological response that was capable of overcoming the adaptation of the working class to capitalism and instead proposed a revolutionary alternative. This does not mean that the overthrow of the system is identical to the creation of an oppositional ideology but it does mean that the possibility has been created for the crisis of the system to be interpreted in revolutionary terms. The connection between party and class generates the development of a revolutionary ideology that challenges the dominant ideology of class compromise and instead upholds a perspective of opposition to the system. The result of this ideological revolution is to create the conditions for the militant practice of class struggle.

Bukharin describes the situation since the outbreak of World War One in the following manner: “While the working class had evolved an ideology that was independent of that of the bourgeoisie, the working class nevertheless was strongly imbued with a faith in the permanence of the capitalist world order, with an attachment to the capitalist state; the mentality of class harmony had great power. No true uprising of one class against the other was possible before the consummation of the entire psychological and ideological revolution. Such a revolution takes place when the objective evolution places the oppressed class in an “intolerable situation” causing it to feel clearly that no improvement can be obtained under the existing order. A class attains this realization when the conflict between the growth of the productive forces and the production relations has produced a collapse of the social equilibrium and made it impossible to restore it on the old basis.”(15) This understanding is the generalised expression of the transformation of proletarian ideology. What is being explained is the character of the formation of a revolutionary ideology. But it is entirely possible with Bukharin’s approach to explain the various reasons why the situation can be at variance from his conception of the generation of revolutionary ideology. Thus in relation to the present situation we can suggest that for whatever reasons the working class does not consider it is in an intolerable situation that can only be changed by revolutionary methods. Furthermore, the various Marxist organisations are not influential and so the doctrine of class struggle is not popular. Hence whilst it can be argued that the system is in decline in terms of a growing contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production the generation of revolutionary ideology has not occurred. Furthermore, it could also be argued that the situation was intolerable in the period 1914-17, and yet ideological revolution had not occurred because of the influence of parties that had become reformist and the related isolation of the principled forces of Marxism. There was a dichotomy between the economic situation and the dismal political prospect for revolution. The dominant ideology was that of social chauvinism and the political expression of the decline of the economic system had not yet been realised.

The ideological revolution is possibly the most important aspect of the revolutionary process because once it has been realised the next crucial task is that of political revolution or the seizure of power. The revolutionary ideology is translated into action. The revolution involves the destruction of the existing state apparatus and the construction of a new state that acts in the interests of the formerly subordinated class. Bukharin does not outline this process in detail because he is concerned with describing in brief the stages of the revolutionary process. But we would suggest that it is necessary to discuss the methods of struggle for power such as general strike or insurrection and the role of the organisations of the working class such as parties, factory committees and soviets. The fact that he mentions only briefly the importance of political revolution is an indication of the primary significance of ideological revolution. The undermining of the domination of bourgeois ideology is of crucial importance if the tasks of the revolution are to become immediate. Any question of movement from the significance of ideology to the role of revolutionary insurrection is to be ruled out if the subordinated class is still under the influence of the bourgeoisie. We can extend his approach in relation to the present and suggest that the influence of bourgeois ideology can even undermine the development of militant mass action. Limited popular support for the austerity policy has to some extent restricted the creation of a mass movement of opposition and instead reconciled the working class with ‘what is’.

The third stage of the revolutionary process is the economic revolution: “The new class, now in power, makes use of its power as a lever for economic upheaval, breaks up the production relations of the old type and begins to erect new relations which have been maturing in the womb of the old order, and in contradiction with that order.”(16) Bukharin describes in realistic detail how this process may result in the possible destruction of the productive forces caused by the upheaval of establishing new relations of production and the possibility of civil war. But the establishment of new production relations can bring about a new equilibrium that expresses a technical revolution and the expansion of the productive forces. However the aim of construction can overcome the problem of upheaval and promote the possibility to build a society that is technically superior to capitalism: “A new class, to be capable not only of destroying the old system of social relations, but of building up the new one, must necessarily turn its interests in the direction of production,, i.e., it must not approach social questions from the standpoint of division and mere distribution, but from that of destruction of old forms for the purpose of construction of forms with more perfect production, with more powerful productive forces.”(17) This formulation of the construction of socialism is ambiguous about the prospect of the building of socialism in one country. It seems to be suggested that the working class with the ability to transform production relations can organise the productive forces nationally in order to construct socialism. However the issue of the international situation is not evaluated by Bukharin.

Bukharin describes the potential for the working class to become revolutionary in terms of the following attributes. Firstly it is economically exploited and politically repressed. Secondly it must be poor. Thirdly it must be producing and so capable of organising production in a different society. Fourthly it is not limited by private property. Fifthly: “This class must be one which has been welded together by the conditions of its existence and its common labour, its members working side by side. Otherwise it will be incapable of desiring – not to mention constructing – a society that is the embodiment of the social labour of comrades.”(18) He also argues that not only does the proletariat have these attributes it also can develop the psychology and habits of organised action, comradeship and opposition to capital. In other words the point being made is that if for some reason the working class lacks some of these aspects its ability to struggle against the system can be undermined. It has been suggested that the working class of the present has become atomised and incapable of effective collective action because of the important changes that have occurred within capitalism. But we could also argue that the working class remains exploited and works together in common. Thus in this manner it is a class that could provide an alternative to capitalism. In the terms described by Bukharin the collective actions of the working class could contribute towards the creation of a new society. However the major reason that this prospect does not occur is because of the influence of bourgeois ideology. The result of this ideology is that the working class can lack distinct consciousness of itself as a class: (We could also argue that this situation is reproduced today because of the legacy of defeats in the class struggle and the low level of socialist culture “The result is that a class discharging a definite function in the process of production may already exist as an aggregate of persons before it exists as a self-conscious class; we have a class, but no class consciousness. It exists as a factor in production, as a specific aggregate of production relations; it does not yet exist as a social, independent force that knows what it wants, that feels a mission, that is conscious of its peculiar position, of the hostility of its interests to those of the other classes.”(19)

In other words the class has not become aware of its character as a ‘class for itself’. Lacking this awareness it is not likely that the actions of the working class will become directed against the state power and in favour of the overthrow of capitalism. Therefore it is possible that the working class retains the various attributes that Bukharin described as being an expression of its potential to be a revolutionary class and yet does not act like a ‘class for itself’. The main reason for this situation is the role of bourgeois ideology and the result is that the working class conceives of its interests as being compatible with those of the capitalist class. This situation can be explained when the working class considers its interests as identical with the nation and imperialism. This situation can also be apparent when the workers of one workplace consider their interests to be similar to those of the employer rather than with workers of other workplaces. (It could be argued that this situation is present within many workplaces.)But the beginnings of class consciousness are caused by class antagonism: “A class interest arises when it places one class in opposition to another. The class struggle arises when it throws one class into conflict with another.”(20) But even this situation is not yet the creation of the development of a class acting for itself. It is entirely possible that class antagonism can result in only the workers of a single factory going on strike and the other workers remain at work. Only a generalised strike wave would generate the explicit opposition of classes and raises questions about which class would rule society. In this situation it would be necessary for the working class to develop its consciousness if it is to realise its distinct and antagonistic objectives. The economic struggle becomes a political struggle about state power: “Class struggle therefore means a struggle in which one class has entered into action against the other class…..Indeed when the oppressed class rises as a class power to oppose the oppressing class, this signifies that the oppressed class is undermining the basis of the existing order. And since the organization of power of the existing order is the state organization of the commanding class, it is obvious that each action of the oppressed class is directly aimed against the state mechanism, even though the participants in the struggle of the oppressed class may not at first be fully conscious of their hostility to the state power.”(21)

In these terms we could argue that the present situation indicates that the working class has not yet realised a condition of the ‘class for itself’. The economic condition of the system is one of negative equilibrium that represents the objective possibilities for the formation of revolutionary ideology. However the class struggle has not realised the intensity that has resulted in a struggle for state power. Instead the working class is often passive and is resigned to the imposition of the austerity policy and the trade union bureaucracy has tight control over the actions of the labour movement. Thus even if we can indicate the development of particular manifestations of class activity these actions have not united in terms of conscious opposition to the state power. Instead the working class has presently accepted its subordination within capitalism. In order for the working class to become a class for itself it not only has to realise a condition of generalised class struggle it also has to create organisations that can express the potential to undermine the existing state power and represent the potential for a new society: “The oppressed class, the bearer of the new mode of production, in the course of the struggle….becomes transformed from a class in itself into a class for itself; in this struggle it creates its fighting organizations, which to an increasing degree build up organizations that carry with them the entire mass of the given class.”(22)

Hence Bukharin’s argument is that when the militancy of the working class assumes revolutionary proportions we have a situation in which the working class becomes a class for itself. This point can be indicated in relation to the situation concerning Greece. The working class in Greece was able to carry out militant actions but it did not recognise the necessity to challenge existing state power. As a result of this lack of class consciousness the austerity policy of the EU was imposed. In contrast the formation of Soviets during the 1917 Russian revolution represents a revolutionary power that was always an organised opposition to the authority of the Provisional Government. The fact that this organisation represented the revolutionary class consciousness of the workers meant it could be utilised in order to carry out an insurrection that overthrew the government. The working class recognised that the situation of dual power was ultimately intolerable and the only alternative to this impasse was revolution. This understanding was an expression of the realisation of the class for itself. However the reformist legacy of the contemporary working class means that the prospect to develop the class for itself is very difficult and complex. The bureaucratic limitations of the trade union leadership contribute to this difficulty. This situation does not mean that Bukharin’s perspective is unrealistic but it does mean that the role of the Marxist party is crucial for promoting the conception of the class for itself.

The task of Social Democracy is dedicated to lowering class consciousness and so undermining the prospect of militant class struggle. Hence the development of revolutionary Marxism can promote the class struggle and the generation of the class for itself. But the true test of the creation of the class for itself remains the conscious attempt to overthrow the existing state power and the establishment of the new society of democratic socialism. Social Democracy is opposed to the formation of the class or itself because it is opposed to the revolutionary attempt to overthrow state power. Instead it is based on adaptation to the system. Thus if Social Democracy has majority support within the working class the prospect of the realisation of the class for itself is very difficult. This means that the task is to promote a situation in which the influence of revolutionary Marxism becomes greater. In this context the particular role of Marxism is to provide guidance to the various struggles of the working class. This means influencing these struggles to become an expression of conscious opposition to the dominant state power. Therefore when the various struggles become an alternative to the existing state power the condition of class for itself has been created. However what has also occurred is the end of the domination of the trade union bureaucracy and Social Democracy. The working class is also no longer deferential towards the existing state power and is instead prepared to overthrow the state in order to establish a different type of society.

Bukharin also argues that the working class is not uniform in terms of the influence of its division into sectional groups. This means that it is incapable of acting as a homogenous class that is able to promote the realisation of the new society. Instead it must have the leadership of a party that is dedicated to the interests of the working class: “As a matter of actual fact, the struggle of the working class is inevitable; this struggle must be guided; this guidance is the more necessary, since the opponent is powerful and cunning, and fighting him is a serious matter. We naturally expect to find the entire class led by that section of it that is most advanced, best schooled, most united: the party”(23) This view does not suggest that the struggle of the working class is created by the party rather the party provides strategic advice concerning how the struggle against the ruling class can be successful. The ideological cohesion and common interest of the party in the victory of the working class means that it is capable of providing this strategic vision and principled perspective that will bring about success in the class struggle. The party and the class are not identical but nor are they opposites in that they share common interests in obtaining victory over the ruling class, but the party has greater consciousness in that it is able to outline a strategy that indicates the ultimate and primary victory in the class struggle is based on the destruction of the state power of the ruling class and the overthrow of the existing system.

Bukharin outlines how the relations of party and class can result in victory in the class struggle: “On what does result in the struggle depend under these conditions? It depends on a proper relation between the various parts of the working class, particularly on a proper mutual relation between those in the party and outside of it. On the one hand guidance and leadership are necessary; on the other, instruction and conviction. No leadership is possible which does not instruct and convince. On the one hand, the party must be held together and organized separately as a part of the class; on the other hand, it must secure closer and closer contact with the non-party masses and draw a greater and greater section of these masses into its organization.”(24) The crucial aspect of the party and working class relationship is one of interaction and dialogue based on the party being able to provide leadership to the class in the class struggle. Hence the question of leadership is not based on dictation and imposition but is instead based on the consent of the class that the guidance that is provided by the party is superior in relation to obtaining the most successful results in the class struggle. This means that the actual separation between party and class is not the expression of distinct interests of party and class and is instead because of uneven consciousness between party and class. The party should have a uniform aspiration for attaining the task of socialism whilst the consciousness of the class can be both reactionary and progressive. Hence the party strives to realise uniform consciousness within the class that is based on the aim of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. In this context it provides a programme, strategy, theoretical advice for the class struggle, and the role of leadership is based on these aspects rather than instruction that is based on dictates about how conflict should occur. This aspect of consent in the relations between party and class is because the role of the party is to bring about closer relations with the rest of the class. Hence imposition would alienate the class from the party and as a result the rival influence of Social Democracy would not be ended. Therefore the type of leadership and instruction provided by the party is democratic in that it expresses advice about how the class struggle should be conducted and is based on the principles of dialogue rather than dictation.

If we attempt to understand the process of transition to socialism it is in terms of the outcome of the intensification of class conflict. The contradiction between the productive forces and the relations of production can only be resolved in relation to the result of the class struggle: “If we consider society as a certain system developing objectively, we find that the transitions from one class system…..to another is accomplished through a bitter class struggle. In this objective process of social changes the classes constitute the basic apparatus of transmission for reshaping the entire body of the living conditions of society. The structure of society changes through men and not outside of men; the production relations are as much a product of human struggle as are flax or linen (Marx)”(25) Thus it is the role of the class struggle that defines whether the result is transition to socialism or instead is the continuation of capitalism. The contradiction between the relations of production and the productive forces that is the basic contradiction indicating the maturing of the conditions for socialism, can only be resolved by the actions of humans. It cannot be resolved automatically or mechanically as the outcome of the imperatives of the productive forces that is independent of human activity. This is why it entirely possible that a ruling class that is no longer progressive and an expression of the productive forces can attain victory in the class struggle. Thus society can reproduce itself in the inadequate terms of the negative equilibrium. Indeed because of the importance of class struggle it is entirely possible that society can continue to decay until a possible victory is obtained in the class struggle by the subordinated class. Hence the emphasis on the role of the class struggle means that history is open-ended and Bukharin’s prediction of the inevitability of the victory of socialism contradicts his acceptance of the importance of class conflict.

However his confidence in the success of the working class is based on his understanding that it represents the new mode of production: “A class which is not the bearer of a new mode of production cannot “transform society”. On the contrary, the class power which embodies the growing and ever advancing conditions of production is also the fundamental living lever of social transformation.”(26) Hence the confidence in the ability of the working class to achieve victory in the class struggle is because it represents a superior mode of production within the existing economic system. However Bukharin has also outlined ideological and political reasons why the ruling class may be able to undermine the successful realisation of these tendencies for transition to socialism. The role of ideology can mean the domination of the working class by the ideas of the ruling class, and the political struggle may result in the victory of the capitalists. Consequently we can suggest that the role of strategy is vital if the working class is to realise the potential for the creation of socialism. However this is what is lacking in the work of Bukharin. This omission is logical because he has not written a programme and instead is concerned to outline the historical materialist premises for transition to socialism. However we can provide some strategic comments based on the approach of Bukharin. We would suggest that the condition of negative equilibrium provides the favourable conditions for the victory of the working class in the class struggle. But if this prospect is to occur the working class has to achieve an ideological revolution which means its view of reality is no longer dependent on the standpoint of the ruling class. This prospect is connected to the growing influence of the Communist party which is able to provide a perspective that undermines the ideological hegemony of the ruling class. Furthermore the Communist Party is able to provide guidance to the working class that enables it to become a class for itself, or becomes conscious opponents of the state power of the capitalist class and supporters of socialism. Hence the process of ideological transformation significantly advances the ability of the working class to become revolutionary. But it still has to achieve revolution in practice. This aim is realised by the act of smashing the state power of the ruling class and establishing a state that represents the interests of the working class.

From Bukharin’s analysis we can understand that without the role of a Communist Party the prospect of victory of the working class in the class struggle is significantly undermined. The Communist Party enables the working class to overcome its sectionalism and concentration on momentary rather than permanent interests. Without the role of Marxism the class struggle lacks the revolutionary perspective and is instead based on limited economic demands. Furthermore, the ideology of the ruling class remains dominant. But the influence of the class struggle generates the possibility for the emergence of a Marxist party that is able to provide leadership via the role of theory and programme. In this context the prospects to resolve the contradiction between the productive forces and relations of production in favour of the working class becomes advanced.

In conclusion whilst it is possible to interpret Bukharin’s approach in terms of the conception of an automatic conception of the contradiction of the productive forces and the relations of production, this would be a one sided evaluation. What Bukharin has actually carried out is a dynamic understanding of this contradiction in terms of the importance of the class struggle. In this context he is actually one of the first Marxists to outline the importance of ideological struggle and to establish its importance for the class struggle and he establishes the role of the party in relation to the conception of historical materialism. Therefore he outlines the connections between the economic, ideological and political in relation to comprehending the prospects for change. He has elaborated Marx and Plekhanov’s conception of the revolutionary process. But what is unique to Bukharin’s interpretation of their views is his insertion of the role of the party. He is effectively arguing that whilst economic crisis may have created favourable opportunities for revolutionary change it is still necessary to develop close relations between party and class. These objective conditions will not in themselves bring about socialism and instead what is crucial is a conscious working class based on interaction with the party. Hence his approach is not a justification of economic determinism and instead should be utilised in order to defend a dynamic appreciation of the class struggle as the basis of social transformation. But he has left us with an important question: is the working class still capable of realising an alternative to capitalism? If we cannot answer this question with a yes serious questions are raised about the prospects of success in the class struggle.

FOOTNOTES:

(1)Nikolai Bukharin: Historical Materialism, George Allen and Unwin, London 1925

(2)Gramsci

(3)Bukharin, op cit p48

(4) ibid p51

(5) ibid p71

(6) ibid p212

(7) ibid p240

(8) ibid p241

(9) ibid p242

(10) ibid p244

(11) ibid p249

(12) ibid p253

(13) ibid p254

(14) ibid p255

(15) ibid p255-256

(16) ibid p259

(17) ibid p287

(18) ibid p289

(19) ibid p293

(20) ibid p297

(21Ibid p298-299

(22) ibid p302

(23) ibid p305

(24) ibid p306

(25) ibid p308

(26) ibid p308