IS THE CLASS STRUGGLE FINISHED? BY Phil Sharpe

Introduction

It has been argued by some commentators that social changes, and the decline in popularity of the arguments favouring socialism, has meant that support for the aim of an alternative to capitalism is at an historical low point. This viewpoint is substantiated by the claim that Marxism no longer has mass allegiance and instead people cannot comprehend an alternative to capitalism. In this context it is possible to envisage that whilst discontent with the system will continue, and strikes and militant actions will occur, these will no longer be connected to the aim of socialism. Hence what has been discredited is the Marxist conception of the historical mission of the working class to be an agency for the process of the transformation of capitalism and the realisation of communism. This view suggests that liberal capitalism, whilst it has many critics, cannot be superseded, and instead the most that can be expected is that the present system will be reformed in order to realise the concerns and aspirations of ecology, gender, race, and religion. Thus the increasingly influential critics of capitalism do not envisage an alternative and instead their aims are limited to the reform of the present system. What is effectively agreed is that the working class will not act in order to bring about the replacement of capitalism with an alternative. The working class is neither sociologically capable, nor ideologically willing, to act as the expression of the aims of Marxism.

However, it is necessary to introduce a modification into the equation. It is an idealist error to conceive of contemporary history in terms of an inherent theoretical and practical relationship between Marxism and the working class. Marx may have been one of the most effective and brilliant theorists of the exploited and subordinated position of the working class as the creator of labour power and surplus value, but this does not mean that the result would have been an inevitable creation of the connection between the working class and the aims of Marxism. In order to establish this relationship the working class would have to overcome the influence of bourgeois ideology, and the moderating influence of its own political parties, and also resist the pressures of the existing system. But primarily, capitalism itself would change in order to undermine the prospect of the connection between Marxism and the working class. Thus there is nothing inevitable about the possibility of Marxism becoming the viewpoint of the working class. Even the most militant struggles would not generate this connection. Thus the British general strike of 1926 did not overcome the minority status of the Communist party. Furthermore, the multiplicity of organisations claiming to be Marxist meant the working class had a complicated choice in choosing which represented their interests most principally and ably.

The very role of Marxism also established an additional complication. It argued, in its Leninist form, that it was not possible for the working class to achieve liberation without the leading and vanguard role of the party. This perspective was complicated by the rise of Stalinism which was no longer committed emphatically to the aim of proletarian revolution. Instead its standpoint had become that that of party revolution, and the working class was to have an entirely secondary role in this process of bureaucratic change. Hence the Marxist aim of the self-emancipation of the working class had been undermined by the very political development of Stalinism. In the period 1929-89 the very confused aspiration of the working class to bring about serious change was undermined by the character of its political representation. The spontaneous tendency for change was faced with the opposition of bourgeois parties and the major political parties of the working class. In contrast, the parties of revolutionary Marxism, the Trotskyists, were undermined by sectarianism and dogmatism, which meant they never became a credible form of revolutionary leadership. This history of the working class in Europe was one of trying to create its own sense of historical mission and aspiring to transform militancy into something more constructive and an expression of the desire for a new social order.

But the neo-liberal offensive of the 1980’s has created new complications. The offensive of the capitalist class had an important aim which was to undermine the social power of the working class. This aim was based on direct legislative attacks on the role of the trade unions, and the transformation of society in favour of the importance of the service sector and the undermining of the collective importance of the working class. The private sector became reduced to units of small scale production and the social importance of the public sector was under increasing attack. In many senses the working class was fragmented and became subservient to the employers because it was grateful to maintain employment in a precarious situation. In this context the influence decreased of what Poulantzas defined as the productive workers, who produced surplus value in the form of commodities, and instead manual work was often replaced by the importance of the service and public sector. There was a rise of white collar work, which has been defined as consisting of the new petty bourgeoisie because of its ideological connection to the capitalist class.(1) Thus the social forces favouring militancy and allegiance to trade unionism decreased, and instead there was a rise of deference favouring the employers. Thus it was not surprising that the recession of 2008, and the policy of austerity, did not result in a militant response. The working class seemed incapable of collective attitudes and action, as Paul Mason observes. (2)

In this situation the alienating power of capital seems to be greater than the declining and fragmenting forces of labour. Hence it would seem that Meszaros, the most principled of Marxists, was optimistic when he called for a socialist offensive of a mass movement against the limitations of capitalism. (3) The point is that we may be able to indicate important contradictions of the capitalist system, such as the falling rate of profit, but these tendencies towards the fragility of the system are outweighed by the problem of the apparent demise of the collective and social weight of the working class. Olin Wright makes the point that the ability to develop coherent and effective strategies able to promote change is connected to the social importance of the subordinated class: “First, it depends upon the consciously pursued strategies and the relative power of social actors who support and oppose the alternative in question………Second, the probability of any given alternative being implemented depends upon the trajectory over time of a wide range of social structural conditions that affect the possibilities of success of these strategies.”(4) We can elaborate the most convincing strategy for social transformation but unless it connects to an important historical actor this strategy will not be realised. This situation seems to be the dilemma of the moment. Thus Marxists can call for the development of an anti-austerity policy but this seems to result in little response because the majority of the population seem to accept they lack the social ability to undermine governmental policy. Hence the only alternative seems to be a survival policy, and resigned acceptance of the standpoint of the Conservatives. The point is that there is discontent but it can only be articulated in ethical terms because people lack the ability to transform this disaffection into effective practice. Consequently, the ideology of resignation and passivity appears to be because of the structural limitations of the social forces of the working class.

Some commentators try to present the situation in the most confident terms. It is argued that the development of the precariat, or the rise of the increasingly temporary, part-time and seasonal workers can still impose their aspirations onto society. Richard Seymour contends that the precariat can have ‘disruptive power’, and contends that: ‘the fact that poor and subaltern forces contribute to the reproduction of the system, cooperating in it, and can withdraw that cooperation just as workers can withdraw their labour power.”(5) This is wishful thinking to consider that someone on zero-hour contracts has as much ability for militancy as a regular factory worker. The very reason that more people are part-time and temporary is because it is an expression of the increased social power of the forces of capital at the expense of the working class, which is often reduced to the level of the precariat. This situation cannot promote the possibility of united action of a stable and collectively powerful working class. However, we have to disagree with pessimists like Paul Mason who argue that the era of working class militancy is over. (6) The point is that on a world scale the working class is increasing numerically and growing in social importance. In this context, the possibility of united and international action can overcome the limitations created by the sociological character of any particular nation state: “Both the capitalist class and the working class are international classes, and the struggle between them – including the struggle for reforms, or to withdraw reforms - is international in character. The idea of national roads to socialism was never anything but a delusion.”(7) The problem is that this perspective equates what should be with the actual. What is ignored is that the very low social weight of the working class in the UK promotes the alienated ideology of national chauvinism, and so results in the popular demand for withdrawal from the EU. Only the generation of mass support for internationalism can overcome the problem of the social decline of the working class in a given nation state and express a credible strategy for social transformation. How we develop this international consciousness is an important aspect of this article.

The Working Class 1848-1917

The first indication of the prospect of proletarian revolution was the revolt of the emerging Paris proletariat in 1848. They were influenced by utopian socialism but primarily they were motivated by anger about the broken promises of the bourgeois Provisional government. Their mass action was complemented by the Chartist struggle for manhood suffrage in the UK. Despite the youthful character of capitalism the infant proletariat showed that it was capable of spontaneous mass action of a revolutionary inclination. This conclusion was confirmed by the formation of the Paris Commune when the alliance of the working class and radical petty bourgeoisie acted to form a revolutionary government that expressed possible aspects of a post-capitalist society. But the formation of the Social Democratic party in Germany represented another type of political development. This party had the standpoint of Marxism and considered itself as a result to be the principled expression of the political interests of the working class. But the Marxist standpoint it advocated was the evolutionary doctrine of natural and historical necessity that increased conflicted with the dynamic expression of working class actions in the form of the mass strike of 1905.(8) Only Rosa Luxemburg consistently supported the mass strike and opposed the conservatism of the trade union leadership. The evolutionary interpretation of Marxism was most seriously tested by the development of the First World War, and this led to the capitulation by the SDP to the absolutist state. The influence of nationalism had undermined the Marxist character of the Second International. Revolutionary Marxism became a minority current led by Luxemburg and Lenin.

In this situation of the capitulation of the principled parties of the Second International it was the protests of the working class that represented the most serious opposition to the war. This development led to the formation of the shop stewards movement in Glasgow and Sheffield, and the increasing discontent of the working class led to the Russian revolution of February 1917. Lenin accepted that this event was the outcome of the spontaneous actions of the working class but because of insufficient consciousness it led to the creation of the bourgeois government.(9) The working class also developed Soviets, following the example of the 1905 revolution, and this action expressed the potential for a Commune or revolutionary state. However, the Mensheviks had an interpretation of Marxism which made them opposed to the struggle for proletarian power. They maintained that the productive forces had not developed sufficiently for the socialist transformation of society. This meant they accommodated to the various bourgeois governments and effectively opposed the increasing discontent of the working class. The Bolsheviks led by Lenin argued it was possible to resolve the dual power situation by the formation of a Soviet government. Consequently, their perspective was for the creation of a principled majority within the Soviets that would favour the formation of the Commune state. This meant the unity of the revolutionary party with the aspirations of the working class. The point is that the progress of the revolution could not occur without increasing support within the working class for the Bolshevik slogan of: ‘All Power to the Soviets’. (10) Thus the revolution was the expression of the principled unity between the development of the Bolshevik majority in the Soviets and the working class support for the implications of this development in terms of the overthrow of the provisional government and the formation of Soviet power. It seemed that a Marxist party could unite with the class in terms of revolutionary objectives. Hence the tense relationship of party and class had apparently been resolved by the establishment of the domination of the Soviets.

1917-1945

The formation of the revolutionary regime in Soviet Russia promoted international unrest in Europe. But the contradictions of the regime were generated by the inability to form a genuine commune state. Instead the adverse economic conditions meant experiments in workers control were quickly replaced by state nationalisation and the democratic regime of the Soviets was reduced to the domination of the party. The formation of the party state, and the development of civil war, meant the state was dominated by a small party elite. Increasingly this led to mass discontent and culminated in the Kronstadt rebellion of 1921. What had resulted was a bureaucratic workers state that was only partially accountable to the working class. However this state was able to introduce the New Economic Policy that was agreeable to the workers and peasants. The Soviet state also promoted the aim of world revolution. Unfortunately Stalin accumulated political power after Lenin’s death and this led to opportunist errors in relation to the British situation and the Chinese revolution. But Bukharin’s influence meant the aim of world revolution was still defended in the Comintern programme of 1928. The defeat of Bukharin enabled Stalin to develop a despotic political regime. In economic terms this resulted in forced collectivisation and industrialisation. This meant the state became an instrument for the exploitation of the working class. (11) In international terms the Comintern became an agency for defending the interests of the Soviet bureaucracy, and this meant the effective rejection of the perspective of world revolution.

Consequently, the supposed vanguard party of the working class upheld the interests of the counterrevolutionary Soviet bureaucracy and this meant acceptance of capitulation to German fascism rather than serious orientation to the united front and the prospect of the struggle for proletarian revolution. In other words, the dynamic of the mass struggles of the working class in a period of economic crisis and political instability meant opposing the reactionary limitations of the Stalinist parties. Trotsky makes this point in relation to the character of the Spanish revolution: “Two irreconcilable programs thus confronted each other in the territory of republican Spain. On the one hand, the program of saving at any cost the private property from the proletariat, and saving as far as possible democracy from Franco, on the other hand, the program of abolishing private property through the conquest of power by the proletariat. The first program expressed the interests of capitalism through the medium of the labour aristocracy, the top petty bourgeois circles, and especially the Soviet bureaucracy. The second program translated into the language of Marxism the tendencies of the revolutionary mass movement not fully conscious but powerful.”(12) The same dynamic was expressed in France when the working class engaged in a spontaneous mass strike that challenged the system. This situation was resolved by the Stalinists negotiating a wage increase.

In other words the militancy of the working class represented a spontaneous dynamic that posed the prospect of the overthrow of capitalism. A principled revolutionary party would have attempted to develop a strategy for the realisation of political power. Instead the Stalinists acted consciously to undermine the revolutionary dynamics in Spain and France, and instead they upheld the Popular Frontist approach of the defence of bourgeois democracy against the threat of Fascism. This strategy failed to undermine the development of world war, and instead the USSR supported the Nazi-Soviet pact in order to temporarily thwart the expansionist aims of German imperialism. The dogmatic defence of the Soviet Union as the alternative to world revolution had led to alliance with the Nazis. Consequently, there was acute demoralisation within the international working class. It seemed that there was no alternative other than to support ‘democratic imperialism’ against Fascism. Even this opportunist strategy was undermined by the rapid capitulation of France to the military invasion of the German army. The reactionary logic of Stalinism had led to the effective victory of Fascism in Europe. The Fourth International represented an alternative but this was unknown and was to be seriously persecuted in the world war. The Nazi invasion of the USSR led to the alliance of the USSR, UK and USA. This alliance was ultimately victorious against the forces of German imperialism, but it led to the domination of Eastern Europe by the USSR, and the USA became the supreme power within the world economy. These developments undermined the class consciousness of the international working class. The militant and distinct consciousness of the working class in Europe became reduced to that of anti-fascism, and the influence of the USSR over the advanced workers was reaffirmed with the growth of the various Communist parties in France, Italy and Greece. These political developments meant the working class could not assert its own independent interests for about 25 years.

1945-2015

The Cold war led to the political division within the international working class between pro-Soviet and pro-American views. Hence the working class no longer had an independent voice and instead became an agency for the rivalry of the major forces in the Cold war. It as the Hungarian uprising of 1956 which indicated that the working class was still potentially revolutionary and capable of promoting a conception of society based on its social power. There was also a revival of Social Democracy, which in a mediated manner of class compromise indicated the importance of the working class in the form of the welfare state. However, this post-war settlement was also supported by American imperialism which wanted to undermine the appeal of the USSR. The aspirations of the working class were also realised in the form of the consumer society. In ideological terms this seemed to indicate that capitalism, which had been associated with poverty and inequality, became replaced by the aims of social justice and the re-distribution of wealth. Thus Social Democracy seemed to represent the aspirations of the working class, even if Conservative governments were often in political power. The 1960’s resulted in the Vietnam War, and the radicalisation of the students, but the events of France in 1968 indicated that the collective and militant power of the working class had not been undermined by the affluent society. Instead the international working class gained its confidence to assert its interests in the form of strike action, occupations, and the aim of industrial democracy. Thus the aim of the capitalist state was to oppose the translation of spontaneous class action into the conscious struggle for social power by the working class. Both Social Democracy, and the bourgeois parties, attempted to limit the significance of the increasing discontent with the capitalist system. Ultimately it was the influence of Social Democracy, the various Communist parties, and the trade union bureaucracy, that restricted the scope and ability of the working class to translate militancy into the conscious aim to overthrow capitalism. The forces of the Marxist left also developed and encouraged the role of militancy.

However, the ruling class of countries like the USA and UK realised that they required a strategy of authoritarian populism in order to undermine militancy. This standpoint combined an appeal to nostalgic nationalism with an offensive against the trade unions. The Falkland’s war was the turning point in the UK. This indicated the extent of the popular support for imperialism and the increasing decline of class consciousness. The result was the victory for Thatcher in the 1983 general election and the demoralisation of the Labour movement. But the ascendency of Thatcherism also led to working class resistance in the form of the miner strike of 1984-85. The defeat of the miners was a strategic defeat of the working class despite the popular struggle against the Poll tax in 1989. This meant the ascendency of the neoliberal offensive in many countries. The result of this situation was the sociological transformation of the working class in order to promote the process of capital accumulation. Militancy became associated with the working class of the past, and increasingly factory work was limited to small scale production and the ascendency of post-Fordism. However possibly the most important single event was the demise of the Soviet empire which led to the ideological view that the project of socialism was over. (13) The fact that the USSR had nothing to do with authentic socialism was ignored and instead the view was that capitalism had become supreme and could not be challenged. In actuality the working class could now emancipate itself from the ideology of Stalinism, and so would be able to promote the perspective of self-emancipation, but this understanding was ignored because of the triumphalism of the supporters of capitalism. In this reactionary context Social Democracy uncritically adapted to globalisation, and the aim of developing the welfare state became neglected.

It was also argued that globalisation meant the realisation of the logic of capital accumulation. The nation state became the competitive basis for the promotion of a low wage economy and the working class was put on the defensive by the imperatives of globalisation. (14) The working class could defend its interests if it acted as an international class, but the ideological and political limitations of the national character of the trade unions meant the working class could not realise global forms of solidarity and instead it was subject to the competitive pressures of the world economy. The influence of bourgeois ideology, such as nationalism, meant the working class could not act as a class for-itself, and instead it was subordinated to the hegemonic standpoint of the state and the various influential establishment parties. For example, the British working class accepted the policy of austerity as the only sound economic basis to resolve the problems of the 2008 recession. This policy led to drastic reductions in the standard of living but this situation was accepted as the only sensible economic resolution of the economic crisis. The passivity of the working class indicated that the legacy of militant trade unionism and the culture of socialism had been undermined by the economic and political effects of the neoliberal offensive. This is the context to question the view that class struggle would bring about the transformation of society.

Left-wing activists increasingly emphasise the role of protest, but they did not connect these single issue campaigns with the prospect of the transformation of society and the advance of the socialist alternative. Instead they adopted the vague politics of anti-capitalism as the following comment suggests: “Ultimately we need effective anti-capitalist organisation that comes to be recognised as a serious threat to the ruling class, which can act as a real leadership within the social movements, not by imposition but by a genuine unity of interests between the revolutionaries and the people.”(15) It is implicitly recognised that the various campaigns do not associate themselves with either working class agency, or the goal of socialism, and so the aims of Marxism have to be diluted and changed in order to relate to the scepticism of the activists about revolutionary goals. This compromise is based on the acknowledgement that the development of working class militancy belongs to the past, and instead what should be prioritised is the aspirations of the single issue campaigners. Furthermore, this view seems to be located within social reality because the post-modern working class seems incapable or unwilling to engage in militant activity. Instead the working class seems to be demoralised and susceptible to the populist demagogy of right wing organisations like UKIP and the Front National of France. Consequently, the Marxist organisations that continue to stridently advocate revolutionary politics seem to be in denial about the seriousness of the situation. Instead of this avoidance of important issues it is necessary to seriously tackle the view that the class struggle is over.

The Historical Materialist argument for revolutionary change

In an important work on Historical Materialism, Louis Althusser outlines the Marxist view that the class struggle originates within the capitalist relations of production when the working class opposes its exploitation. But in order to become revolutionary this struggle must become political and therefore aim to transform the relations of production and establish socialism: “It is also easy to understand that the destiny of every class struggle, the victorious revolutionary class struggle included, ultimately depends on an accurate conception of the relations of production. To ‘build socialism’, it will be necessary to establish new relations of production that abolish, concretely, the exploitative effects of the previous relations of production, together with all their class effects.”(16) But it is necessary to elaborate this perspective. Hence it is important to establish that this approach represents a Marxist understanding of the class struggle. Thus we can suggest that the objective and material conditions within the relations of production may result in the workers opposing exploitation in the form of striving to obtain higher wages and better conditions, but the adoption of the standpoint of political class struggle means the conscious acceptance of Marxism. As Lenin was aware the doctrine of socialism requires the advocacy of a Marxist organisation. Hence there is no conception of historical necessity, or guarantee, that the working class will become advocates of socialism. Instead the most that we should assume is that the conditions of the capitalist relations of production will result in the opposition of the working class to its exploitation. However, we can also accept that an improvement in wages may result in the workers becoming satisfied with their situation. Consequently political class struggle for socialism is not inherent in the empirical fact of economic class struggle. But in relation to the contemporary situation important structural changes may also have created serious issues about the very validity of economic class struggle. For example, post-Fordist conditions of work may enhance the satisfaction of workers with their conditions within the factory. This situation is complemented by the fact that the increase in white collar work also results in a culture of conformity and acceptance of the existing relations of production.

How can the struggle for socialism be promoted in these unfavourable conditions? We must recognise that the conditions for the reproduction of the existing relations of production is upheld by the role of ideology, or what Althusser defines as the ideological state apparatus. Therefore the task of the Marxist party is to influence the consciousness of the working class that the economic class struggle is not sufficient to overcome the situation of exploitation within the relations of production. To be content with the tasks of economic class struggle is to accommodate to bourgeois ideology because the result of this standpoint is to possibly modify but not transform the existing relations of production. Instead: “The paradox is that, in order to destroy the class relations of the capitalist exploitation, the working class must seize bourgeois state power, destroy the state apparatus, and so on, because the state is the key to the reproduction of capitalist relations of production. To overthrow the infrastructure of exploitation, therefore, the proletariat and its allies must take state power and destroy the state machine. This proposition is perfectly correct from the standpoint of proletarian class war, which must direct the political attack against the state, because the state is that which guarantees the conditions of the reproduction of the system of exploitation, or, in short, that which maintains the capitalist system upright, by perpetuating it.”(17)

Thus even if we modify this viewpoint, and indicate the importance of the struggle for industrial democracy for undermining the reproduction of the capitalist relations of production, the point is still valid that the primary aspect of transforming the relations of production requires the development of political class struggle and the overthrow of the bourgeois state. However, this is a conclusion developed by Marxism, and so the task is to convince the working class that economic class struggle is not sufficient and will not overcome the present situation of exploitation. The economic struggle can only modify the exploitative limitations of the capitalist relations of production, and so it is necessary to engage in political class struggle that ends the domination of the bourgeois state. However, the contemporary problem for Marxism is that whilst the working class of the past was often receptive to this argument, the workers of the present are not. Instead they tend to accept the role of the bourgeois state and even reject the importance of economic class struggle. How can Marxism address this situation? Firstly, Marxism has to acknowledge the depth of this problem. The working class lacks the consciousness of the past for many reasons. Thus Marxism has to address the issue of low class consciousness and the influence of bourgeois ideology. Secondly, it is possible to increase the effectiveness of Marxism in order to promote class consciousness but ultimately this development depends on the capacity of the working class. Hence the question of the transformation of society depends upon historical possibility rather than expressing a rigid culmination of historical necessity. (18) The prospect of the transformation of society does not depend on the process of the development of the productive forces, but instead on the ability and willingness of subordinated classes to act to bring about the demise of capitalism. It is also necessary to accept that capitalism is the economic system that is able to develop the productive forces most efficiently because of competitive accumulation. However, the inability of capitalism to realise material needs, except in the most partial manner, is sufficient reason to strive for socialism. However, people will not attempt to achieve socialism because of ideological reasons and the very generation of doubts about the possibility to develop a superior alternative to capitalism.

Olin Wright makes the point that people may act in terms of structural constraints that undermine their ability to strive to realise an alternative: “My argument will be based about an assertion of a certain type of preference, which I believe people in general hold, even if they are not consciously aware of it, namely an interest in expanding their capacity to make choices and act upon them. This preference may be blocked, but ‘deep down inside’ people in general have a desire for freedom and autonomy. Insofar as the actual capacity that individuals have to make choices and act upon them – their real freedom - is shaped systematically by their position within the class structure, they have objective class interests based on this real interest in freedom. To the extent that the conscious preferences of people lead them to make choices which reduce that capacity or block its expansion, then I would say, that they are acting against their ‘true’ or ‘objective’ class interests.”(19) The point is that the character of the capitalist relations of production may generate the continual structural context that undermines the ability to realise the capacities of the subordinated classes. This may take the form of a rejection of the aim of socialism which may be the most effective expression of the potential of the working class. But this effective repression of the role of capacity is not recognised because of the role of ideology which defines freedom and autonomy in terms of the reproduction of the existing relations of production.

Poulantzas outlines the character of bourgeois ideology in the following manner: “Ideology concerns the world in which men live, their relations to nature, to society, to other men and to their own activity including their own economic and political activity. The status of the ideological derives from the fact that it reflects the manner in which the agents of a formation, the bearer of its structures, live the conditions of existence; i.e. it reflects their relation to these conditions as it was ‘lived’ by them. Ideology is present to such an extent in all the agents’ activities that it becomes indistinguishable from their lived experience. To this extent ideologies fix in a relatively coherent universe not only a real but also an imaginary relation.”(20) The most important aspect of this definition is that the influence of ideology means that it is difficult to differentiate the real from the imaginary. Consequently, the reality of the exploitation of the producers is defined as being functional and vital for the development of society. This suggests that capitalist exploitation is perceived as being indispensable and necessary in order to ensure the effective functioning of capitalist relations of production. Ideology provides reasons why the subordinated should accept this situation and reject any suggestion of trying to transform and overthrow capitalism. For example, the austerity policy of the conservative government in the UK is accepted as being perceived as the only ‘rational basis’ to conduct economic activity. The possibility of alternatives is ignored for these ideological reasons. But most importantly, the role of ideology undermines any possibility of developing revolutionary class consciousness because what exists is conceived as the only possible form of society. Ideology makes the subordinated classes accept capitalism as the only realistic type of society despite the objective material content of exploitative relations of production.

Cliff Slaughter argues that Marx’s Capital is written in order to oppose this servile role of ideology: “In this sense, the purpose of Capital, as of all of Marx’s writings, is to provide the consciousness which will assist man to free himself from the outmoded and oppressive social forms grown up on the basis of his past productive achievements. This ‘revolutionary practice’ is the real freedom which Marx opposes to the illusory freedom of the citizen under capitalism. By establishing consciously its true relationship with the productive forces (of which it is itself the principled one), the proletariat makes the ‘leap to freedom’. Capital is the dramatic life history of these productive forces and of this proletariat in struggle against capitalist production relations.”(21) But because of the very role of ideology this standpoint is essentially mythical and an expression of potential rather than the logic of class struggle. The influence of ideology means that the working class does not recognise itself at the level of the understanding of Marx. Hence the standpoint of Marx expresses what is possible if the working class rejects the illusions of bourgeois ideology, but these illusions are formidable because they conflate the real with the imaginary and so are difficult to reject. The ideology of the viability of exploitation of the relations of production seems to be more persuasive than the view of the working class as the revolutionary subject. This is precisely why class struggle is limited to the acceptance of the durability and legitimacy of capitalism. In contrast, Marx’s revolutionary subject implies that the logic of class struggle is communism. This logic has only rarely been realised, and seems to be effectively refuted by the continued decline of the structural coherence of the working class. The contemporary worker seems to have acquired the ideology of the medieval guild worker, or an acceptance of dependency on the role of capital.

This apparently bleak situation has led some commentators to emphasise the role of economic laws that tend to result in crisis and so will promote the possibility of struggles for social change. The problem with this catastrophist view is that it underestimates the ideological and political reasons that undermine this perspective. The present situation has indicated that crisis will not motivate a passive and servile class to engage in militant struggle. It is possible to have some level of discontent and yet this will not promote opposition to the policy of bourgeois governments because their actions are considered to be ‘realistic’ and not open to question. The only principled option in this situation is not to rely on the unfolding of economic tendencies but instead to recognise that Marxism is the only principled viewpoint that rejects the subordinated role of the working class. However, we must also recognise that the approach of Marxism in the past has not been satisfactory and has only resulted in creating rejection of its ideas by the working class. This situation has to be analysed if the revival of Marxism is to occur. Hence the following view of Slaughter is unsatisfactory because it implies the possibility of a close relationship between Marxism and the working class on the basis of the dynamic of class struggle. But this is the very dynamic that is lacking. Slaughter contends: “The working class and of course the other classes in relationship with it – must be studied from the point of view of what it is becoming through struggle, and not simply from the standpoint of defining its role in the existing society. The consciousness of the working class of this role is already an element in the process of abolishing itself as a class, but no less essential is the actual struggle of the working class against the domination of these laws and the political system produced by their operation.”(22)

The point is that it is presently unrealistic to assess the working class in terms of the possibilities of struggle and instead it is important to define its character on the basis of present passivity. We should reject pessimistic conclusions about the workers not being like they were in the past, and also avoid the temptation to glorify the possibilities of predictions about forthcoming struggles. Hence we should define the working class in terms of the relations of production, and this means we should register any important structural changes that have occurred in the last thirty years. The purpose of this study is to establish the character of the working class that has emerged from the process of the neoliberal offensive of the recent period and to understand why it has become susceptible to the arguments of bourgeois ideology. This means we should recognise that the ideology of labourism and Social Democracy has been undermined and the attractions of trade unionism are at a low ebb. In this context the working class has been ideologically divided between those in the public sector who still adhere to the old values of labourism; which contrasts with the producers in private sector and they are more inclined to paternalism and support for business. The traditions of trade union militancy have also been undermined by important defeats of strikes in the past and the effects of legislation. Thus the discontent of the working class becomes expressed in alienated forms of support for the right wing populism of UKIP and opposition to migration. However, there has also been the development of new left wing currents that have led to the election of Jeremy Corbyn as leader of the Labour party, but this development does not provide an alternative to the effective end of the class struggle.

However, Marxists cannot be satisfied with an assessment of what is, instead we attempt to understand how it can be changed. At present, Althusser’s definition of the role of bourgeois ideology at work seems to be successful. This can be described in the following terms: “The workers are the first to be subjected to its effects because it is an ideology of the capitalist class struggle. This ideology…. Comprises the following basic elements, which are so many illusions and impostures, yet are ‘successful’ as long as the workers class struggle does not combat them: 1)the bourgeois legal illusion according to which the ‘labour is paid for at its value’; 2)the corresponding legal-moral ideology which has it that one must ‘respect one’s labour contract’ and through it the enterprise’s house rules and regulations; 3)the technical economistic ideology which has it that ‘there must, after all, be different jobs within the division of labour’ and such-and such individuals to fill them.”(23) This explains the ideology of the submission of labour to capital. Althusser’s understanding is useful to explain the passivity of the working class in the present situation. But capitalism is also based on exploitation, and this promotes the alternative possibility of eventual rebellion against the subordination of labour to capital. This may not happen for a long period of time, and the ultimate development of rebellion may be transitory and limited, but labour cannot be contented with the domination of capital because of the generation of alienation alongside the role of exploitation.

Meszaros provides the most effective argument for the development of revolutionary class consciousness in this situation because the only alternative to the domination of capital is to challenge these relations of production and to promote an alternative: “In the sharpest possible contrast, the minute fragment which the particular wage labourer is condemned to monotonously contribute to the total labour of society is completely subsumed under, and dominated by the ubiquitous commodity structure…..the constraining way in which the capitalistically alienated and homogenized labour power (and productive activity) is circumscribed, it cannot conceivably constitute use-value for its owners (the workers) but only for its non-owners (i.e. The potential buyers: the capitalists). Consequently, productive activity, and the workers totally dependent on it for their livelihood, lose even the semblance of autonomy. Only by radically challenging the system in its entirety as a mode of control can one envisage a way out of the predicament of structural dependency.”(24)

In other words regardless of the apparent reconciliation of labour to the domination of capital because of ideological influences this relationship between capital and labour can only express the condition of exploitation, dependency and alienation. The only basis for the ending of this subordinated position is by labour acting to attempt to transform these relations of production. Hence it can appear that the forces of labour have been tamed by the hegemony of capital, and there is no historical necessity that implies that the working class has to act according to Marxist objectives, and yet the domination of capital suggests the possibility, not inevitability, of the rebellion of labour. In order that this potential rebellion becomes an expression of the conscious aim of socialism requires the influence of Marxism. This relationship is more vital than ever before because the militancy of the workers has been undermined by the neoliberal offensive and the increasing influence of bourgeois ideology. The connection between the working class and the role of struggle seems to have been ended by the events of the last thirty years. This is why Paul Mason is so sceptical about the possibility of the revival of the opposition of labour to the domination of capital. In contrast to this pessimism we have, as Marxists, to effectively reinvent the working class. We have to indicate what the working class could be without the passive influence of bourgeois ideology, and how it can undergo this reinvention by discovering anew the importance of struggle.

But it is important to understand that this process cannot be developed without contradiction, conflict and struggle. Kautsky could envisage the natural relationship of party and class because of the importance of historical necessity. “The chain of inferences proceeds as follows: it is inevitable that the workers will resist capitalist exploitation, that is, it is inevitable that there will be a workers movement; it is inevitable that this resistance will lead to a nation-wide worker political party; it is inevitable that this party will take over control of the state.”(25) These assumptions cannot be made about the present. There is not a receptive working class eager to receive the message of Marxism. Instead it is indifferent to Marxism and the role of a revolutionary party. Struggle against exploitation is not occurring and instead the ideological condition of the class is that of passivity and demoralisation. Thus the relationship of party and class is more that of a conflict of opposites when the Marxists attempt to overcome the influence of bourgeois ideology within the working class: “In point of fact an individual worker does not arrive through his own experience at a scientific consciousness of his actual relationships at work, let alone his political relationships. It is only when a workers comes into contact with the products, in political programme and action, of Marxist theory in politics – i.e., with the outcome of theoretical works produced in the first place by non-proletarians – that he can conceive of even his own working experience in terms which go beyond those of the prevailing bourgeois ideology.”(25)

This approach does not explain all the aspects of the historical experience between Marxism and the working class. There were periods in which it was relatively simple to convince workers of the principled and perceptive character of Marxism. But in the present situation of a working class not schooled in struggle, the influence of bourgeois ideology has to be overcome by the intransigent role of Marxism. However, even if workers are recruited to Marxism, this does not mean that the process of struggle will follow. Only workers can decide if they want to engage in struggle against the exploitative character of the relations of production. Nor can we suggest that this development will result in socialism. But what we can say is that without struggle there will be no socialism. This is what seems to be the character of the present period. But the subordinated passivity of the contemporary working class does not represent a happy society. The apparent supremacy of capitalism does not mean contentment. Genuine satisfaction with society will only occur if the exploitation of the relations of production are opposed by struggle. This development will create hope that the limitations of existing society can be ended. Hope becomes the aspiration for a better type of society, and the imagination of utopia is the flourishing of ideas about how to construct this future. But what will advance struggle most convincingly will be if Marxists develop a strategy that can express the possibilities of militancy. Elaboration of a strategy will be the task of the latter part of this article.

Strategy

We have previously elaborated the contents and demands of a contemporary strategy. The purpose of this article is to justify the possibility of collective struggle in order to generate the possibility of the social transformation of society. Meszaros outlines the view that the structural crisis of capitalism, which involves the intensification of various contradictions and the decline of the welfare state, would mean the effectiveness of reformism would be over and instead the only alternative that upheld the interests of the working class would be the struggle for socialism. But he does not anticipate that this struggle would be of a short-term duration, instead he envisages a protracted development that would occur over many years: “The necessity and historical actuality of the socialist offensive does not man the advocacy of some facile, optimistic, immediate agitational perspective. Far from it. For, in the first place, the historical actuality of a process of transformation – as arising from the manifold, uneven/ conflicting determinations of an objective historical tendency – refers to the historical phase in its entirety, with all its complications and potential relapses, and not to some sudden event that produces an un-problematical linear development.”(27) This perspective has never been realised because it requires a level of class consciousness that the international working class does not have for various reasons, and the aim of socialism is not a popular aspiration. Instead the Marxist Left has tried to develop a movement based on the emphasis on immediate issues like austerity, and this has generally also not been successful. In most countries the policies of deflation have not been contested. Meszaros thinks that at some time the structural crisis of capitalism will impose itself on the consciousness of the working class, and that the result will be support for an offensive for socialism. The problem is that the limitations of capitalism are not recognised because of the influence of bourgeois ideology. Capitalism is accepted as the eternal and natural condition, and so the alternative of an offensive for socialism is effectively considered to be absurd. Even in relation to the political crisis of Greece, the issue of socialism was never raised as an alternative to austerity.

So how is it possible to overcome this impasse? On the one hand it is unprincipled and ineffective to dilute demands to what we believe will be acceptable. For example opposition to austerity does not resolve the economic crisis, and therefore will not develop an alternative to the continued generation of economic problems. On the other hand there is little support for the socialist alternative to austerity. In this apparently unfavourable situation the Marxist Left has no option other than to transform its political agitation from that of unproductive activism and instead make serious arguments as to why socialism is the only answer to austerity. This approach has to develop the connecting view that only the working class can bring about the transformation of society by means of class struggle: “Thought must become the expression of the movement of that social force (the proletariat) which actively transforms the material conditions responsible for the existing contradictions in each sphere of life and thought.”(28) It is possible that this attempt to influence the activity of the working class might not succeed. The role of bourgeois ideology, the limitations imposed by the trade union bureaucracy, and the importance of sociological changes, may prove to undermine the possibility to motivate class struggle. But the point is that Marxists would have seriously tried for the first time in many years to motivate class struggle. However, we can hope that the continued significance of the exploitative character of the relations of production, combined with the increasing ineffectiveness of bourgeois politics, will generate the revival of the class struggle.

Regardless of the apparently unfavourable character of present developments it is the obligation of Marxism to provide the arguments as to why the problems of the present situation can only be improved by the promotion of socialism. In this context it is entirely possible that events may unexpectedly generate sympathy for our views. This is how we should view recent left-wing developments within Europe and the USA. What we should remember is that the exploitation and subordination of the working class is only upheld by the importance of ideology. It is entirely possible that this ideological influence can be undermined by the generation of the renewal of the class struggle. Our task in this situation will be to argue that the class struggle can only be resolved in favour of the working class by movement towards socialism. It has been historic defeats that have undermined the development of this possibility. The reinforcement of the subordination of the working class to capital has led to demoralisation and the discrediting of trade union militancy. The very conception of collective class action has been discredited over recent years, and this view has become more influential because of the marginalisation of Marxism. Hence it has become a reasonable question to ask whether the class struggle is over. The influence of this sentiment has been reinforced by the failure of Marxists to address it, and instead their ignoring of an important issue has led to false optimism. This is expressed by an obsession with the rate of profit and the connected implicit view that the decline of capitalism will ultimately create the class consciousness necessary for the overthrow of capitalism. Such a perspective is false because it ignores the fact that we are presently still in a type of crisis and the result has not been a radicalisation of the working class. Instead bourgeois ideology is influential and the role of Marxism is almost non-existent. Only changing this situation can promote the revival of class struggle. This means Marxism has to overcome its present false modesty and instead provide the arguments for the revival of the class struggle and the possibility of socialism. The point is that without this intervention the possibility to develop the class struggle will be more difficult. What we are trying to suggest is that the crisis of class consciousness is so acute it will require the role of Marxism to challenge this situation. This will not make the generation of class struggle inevitable but it will contribute to its possible revival. We cannot complacently consider that economic limitations of the relations of production will generate class struggle. Instead it is the task of Marxists to interpret these limitations in order to promote the possibility of class struggle. The renewal of the interaction of the working class and Marxism may be vital if we are to argue with conviction that the class struggle is not over.

However it is necessary to address one of the important reasons that undermines the development of class struggle which is nationalism. The unity of the international working class, as within the EU, could create a powerful movement against austerity and for socialism. The unity of the working class, which transcended national boundaries, would also overcome the problems posed by the national weakness of any particular subordinated social force. But instead of that unity the political situation is characterised by national chauvinism and the role of right wing populism. In contrast the capitalist class is capable of acting internationally in order to enhance the interests of capital accumulation. In order to oppose this situation the potential for international class unity needs to be realised as Poulantzas explains: “Also relevant is what is happening on the working class side in the European countries. And here, while the struggles of the popular masses are more than ever developing in concrete conjunctures determined on a world basis, and while the establishment of world relations of production and the socialization of labour are objectively reinforcing the international solidarity of the workers, it is still the national form that prevails, however international they are in essence.”(29) The problem is that the international dynamic is objective in terms of the common development of the productive forces, but the working class still has a national consciousness. This is the primary problem undermining the development of a principled strategy of world revolution. The ideology of the national bourgeois state has to be rejected if the social power of the working class is to be realised in terms of the development of solidarity and the application of a united struggle against international capital.

FOOTNOTES:

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(4) Erik Olin Wright: Envisioning Real Utopias, Verso, London, 2010 p24-25

(5) Richard Seymour: Against Austerity, Pluto Press, London, 2014 p180

(6) Mason, op cit p207

(7) Mike Macnair: Overcoming the power of Capital, Weekly Worker, No 1081 November 5th 2015, p7

(8) Christoph Henning Philosophy After Marx: Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2015 p21-30

(9) V.I. Lenin: The Dual Power, in Collected Works, Volume 23, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1964 p38-42

(10) V.I. Lenin: Tasks of the Proletariat in Our Revolution, p55-89

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(12) Leon Trotsky: The Spanish Revolution (1931-39), Pathfinder Press New York, 1973 p313

(13) Francis Fukuyama: The End of History, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1992

(14) Tobias Ten Brink: Global Political Economy, Haymarket Books, Chicago, 2015

(15) Luke Cooper and Simon Hardy: Beyond Capitalism? Zero books, Hants, 2012 p133

(16) Louis Althusser: On the Reproduction of Capitalism, Verso, London, 2014 p45

(17) ibid p127

(18) Erik Olin Wright: Classes, Verso, London, 1983 p115-117

(19) ibid p249

(20) Nicos Poulantzas: Political Power and Social Classes, New Left Books, London, 1973, p206-207

(21) Cliff Slaughter: Marxism and Class Struggle, New Park, London, 1975 p134

(22) ibid p76

(23) Althusser op cit p42

(24) Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin Press, London 1995 p541

(25) Lars T Lhin: Lenin Rediscovered, Haymarket books, Chicago, 2008 p78

(26) Slaughter op cit p156-157

(27) Meszaros, Beyond Capital op cit p940

(28) Slaughter op cit p3

(29) Poulantzas, 1973 p78