Philosophy and the SWP

In a recent article Mike Macnair suggests that Georg Lukacs has provided justification for the authoritarian regime in the SWP.(1) He outlines this view in terms of Lukacs’s apparent acceptance of important Comintern resolutions of 1920-21 and in relation to the utilisation by Alex Callinicos of the standpoint of Lukacs concerning party organisation. Macnair does not articulate what is problematic about these two important Comintern resolutions and instead implies that they defend an authoritarian understanding of the role of the party in the class struggle. This conception was apparently defended by Lukacs and this standpoint has been inherited by Callinicos and the SWP.

The first resolution Macnair refers to is :’The Role of the Communist Party in Proletarian Revolution’(2) But it is interesting to note that this resolution is written by Zinoviev and so will be less important than the resolutions drafted by Lenin and Trotsky. The resolution does outline a conception of party revolution which means the active role in the process of revolution is that of the party and the working class has a more passive involvement. The resolution assumes that the party will consist of the most advanced workers and this organisation will direct the rest of the working class to support the aim of revolution. Only the Communist Party is able to recognise the general interests of the working class in contrast to the sectional approach of the non-party participants in the class struggle. The relationship between party and class is defined in the following manner: “The Communist Party is the organizational and political lever which assists the more advanced part of the working class to direct the mass of the proletariat and semi-proletariat onto the right path.”(3)

Furthermore, the resolution goes onto to indicate that it is possible that the everyday consciousness of the working class may not express its historic interests. The Second International collapsed because it adapted to the everyday consciousness of the workers rather than upholding the principled position of opposition to the First World War. Only a party that upholds the historic interests of the working class can lead the struggle of the working class for political power: “The Communist International firmly rejects the view that the proletariat can accomplish its revolution without an independent political party. The class struggle is always a political struggle. The goal of this struggle, which inevitably develops into a civil war, is the conquest of political power. However political power can only be seized, organized and channelled by a political party. Only if the proletariat is led by an organized and experienced party which has definite aims, and a worked out programme for immediate action in the sphere of both internal and external affairs, can the seizure of power be a starting point for a long period of communist construction instead of merely a chance episode.”(4)

In other words because only the revolutionary Communist party has a principled understanding of the interests of the working class means it qualifies as the leadership of the class struggle and provide the strategy and tactics that will promote the possibility of political power and the transformation of society. Unfortunately this resolution does not elaborate a more precise relationship of the connections between party and class in the class struggle. Instead the assumption is made that the party will act as the unifying centre of the various forms of mass struggle such as the trade unions, factory committees and workers councils. Hence what is not elaborated is the importance that the mass organisations of the working class can have in the process of struggle against capitalism. Consequently the strategy and programme of struggle is effectively worked out by the party with a minimal role for the mass organisations of the working class. This implies that the relationship between party and class is very hierarchical and is based on the class obeying the directives of the party. If this elitist relationship was undermined and the class refused to obey the party then the very process of revolutionary class struggle would become disrupted and eroded.

Zinoviev contends that the importance of the Soviets for the process of the revolution does not replace the hegemonic role of the party. He insists that: “A strong Communist Party is essential if the Soviets are to fulfil their historical mission” And: “Those who suggest that the Communist Party should ‘adapt’ to the Soviets and view such adaptation as a strengthening of the ‘proletarian character’ of the party are rendering the Party and Soviets a doubtful service, and have failed to grasp the significance either of the party or the soviets. The stronger the Communist Parties we build in every country, the sooner the ‘Soviet idea will triumph.’”(5) This one sided comment does not establish that the ability of the party to relate to the Soviets is based on an understanding of the aspirations of the Soviets and which means that the aims of the Soviets can be reconciled with the revolutionary objectives of the Party. The 1917 slogan of ‘All power to the Soviets’ was popular because it related to the consciousness of those people that participated in the Russian Soviets. It was the very unity of Party and class that enabled the Soviets to become the major agency of revolution. This process did not mean the adaptation of the party to the Soviets and instead it was an expression of the accommodation of the aims of the Party with those of the Soviets.

The resolution also maintains that the role of the party is essential for the tasks posed by the onset of the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. It is assumed that economic construction and the tasks of civil war assume the importance of the domination of the party. This conception ignores the role that could be carried out by workers control of production and the Soviets. Instead the character of the state under the transition to socialism and communism is assumed to be a party state and the involvement of the mass of the working class in the process of economic and political development is effectively ignored. The possibilities that this process of change will have authoritarian tendencies is suggested by the understanding that the party will be organisationally based on ‘iron military discipline’.(6) The principle of the election of higher party organs by lower party organs is adhered to but the prospect of regular democratic elections in order to uphold the accountability of the leadership to the rank and file is ruled out. In other words the resolution justifies the elitist assumption that the leadership should generally be obeyed and that dissident rebellion should be opposed by the enactment of the centralism of the party. Consequently the organisational understanding of Zinoviev justifies the view that the tasks of revolution and the construction of socialism should be the prerogative of the elite party. The rules of the party should make it difficult for democratic opposition to emerge with alternative views about revolutionary strategy and the tasks of the proletarian state.

If the views of Zinoviev about the role of the party were uncontested then we could suggest that the standpoint of the bureaucratic justification of revolution and the construction of socialism was hegemonic. However the perspectives of the Comintern are not monopolised by the sectarian understanding of Zinoviev. Already at the Second Comintern Congress Trotsky is outlining the beginning of the tactic of the united front in the manifesto he has written. He maintains: “The Communist International is the world party of proletarian uprising and proletarian dictatorship. It has no aims and tasks separate and apart from those of the working class itself. The pretensions of tiny sects, each of which want to save the working class in its own manner, are alien and hostile to the spirit of the Communist International. It does not possess any panaceas or magic formulas but bases itself on the past and present international experience of the working class; it purges that experience of all blunders and deviations; it generalizes the conquests made, and recognizes and adopts only such revolutionary formulas as are the formulas of mass action.”(7)

This standpoint indicates the prospect of trying to avoid the approach of ultimatism and instead is trying to reconcile the importance of principles with flexible tactics that attempt to persuade the working class of the superiority of the approach of the Communist International. This objective is not based on the proclamation of the superiority of the Comintern and is instead an attempt to prove in practice that the most effective defenders of the interests of the working class are the various Communist parties. This process implies the importance of consultation with the mass organisations of the working class and so the development of class struggle implies the role of democratic consultation between the party and the organisations of the class. Hence the more elitist standpoint of Zinoviev has not yet become the monolithic approach of the Communist International. The influence of the emerging united front indicates that Lukacs can evaluate alternatives when assessing the role of the various forms of party organisation. The point is that the Comintern in the period 1920-21 is still a fluid organisation that has not yet definitively become defined by the political imperatives of the Soviet state. The various resolutions of the second and third world congresses are preoccupied with the issues of the international class struggle and the result is the formation of the united front approach that represents an attempt to appeal to the workers who support Social Democracy. Hence to define international Communism, as Mike Macnair does, in terms of two organisational resolutions of this period is very dogmatic. Instead it can be argued that the limitations of these organisational resolutions contradict the continued serious appraisal of the issues of strategy and tactics that preoccupy the Communist International. The point is that the Communist International has not yet been tested by the events in the class struggle that occurred in the period 1923-1928 and culminated in the programmatic degeneration of the sixth Comintern Congress. This is not to deny that the effective formation of the deformed workers state in 1918 did not have an effect on the politics of the Communist International but it was still possible for the first four congresses to develop serious policy committed to the advance of the world revolution.

For example it is possible for Trotsky to propose an important ‘Theses on the international situation and the tasks of the Comintern’ for the Third Congress and to indicate how the re-stabilisation of capitalism has expressed the immediate victory of international capital but that the discontent of the working class with the limitations of capitalism has not been overcome. In this situation the task of the Communist International is to develop a strategy (the united front) that can connect the defensive struggles of the present with their transformation into an offensive opposition to the domination of capital: “The fundamental task of the Communist Party in the current crisis is to lead the present defensive struggles of the proletariat, to extend their scope, to deepen them, to unify them, and in harmony with the march of events, to transform them into decisive political struggles for the ultimate goal.”(8) Hence it was still possible for the leaders of the Communist International to describe the character of the class struggle in a serious manner and to elaborate the strategy and tactics for the advance of the world revolution in terms that recognised the difficulties and possibilities for progress in the task of the overthrow of capitalism. The problem of bureaucratism and elitism had not yet undermined the character of the Comintern as an agency of world revolution. Leadership by Lenin and Trotsky meant the Comintern was able to overcome the rigid rationalisation of the class struggle made by people like Zinoviev. The point being made was that the very tensions between authoritarianism and the impulse for democracy and proletarian internationalism could be expressed by the same person such as Lenin and Trotsky. Trotsky was in practice often a defender of state regulation of the economy and also the major proponent of world revolution whilst Lenin was the most perceptive critic of bureaucracy within the state apparatus and yet he also presided over the political system. Furthermore these contradictions could be glossed over to the extent that the deformed workers state was dedicated to the development of a strategy concerned with the advance of the world revolution. Hence the view that the Comintern had become bureaucratised in 1920 was an over-simplification that did not explain the tensions between the increasing demands of the isolated Soviet state and the commitment of the Comintern to the development of the struggle against capitalism.

It could also be argued that not all of the organisational resolutions of the Comintern were a defence of the end of the role of factions and the demise of the role of inter-party democracy. This point can be indicated by study of the organisational resolution of the Third Party Congress, which Macnair believes was an example of the degeneration of Bolshevism. “The Theses on the Organizational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Content of Their Work” was not a simple justification of the elitist domination of the rank and file of the party by the leadership and instead was primarily concerned to establish parties that would be suitable agencies of the interests of class struggle. Hence the document comments: “To lead the revolutionary class struggle, the Communist Party and its leading bodies must possess great fighting power and at the same time the ability to adapt to the changing conditions of struggle. Successful leadership presupposes, moreover, the closest contact with the proletarian masses. Unless such contact is established the leaders will not lead the masses but, at best, only follow them.”(9) In other words the relationship between party and class is not considered in terms of elitism and is instead based on dialogue between these two forces. Hence the strategy that the party develops to promote the prospect of revolution is based on the aspirations of the working class. Thus revolution is conceived as a democratic process of the construction of a popular bloc between party and class. This also implies that the mass organisations of the working class will have an important role in the revolutionary transformation of society.

Consequently it is not surprising that the conception of democratic centralism is connected to the importance of the principles of proletarian democracy. The role of leadership of the party is not to dominate the working class: “Only enemies of Communism can argue that the Communist Party wants to use its leadership of the proletarian class struggle and its centralization of Communist leadership to dominate the revolutionary proletariat.”(10) The party leadership is dedicated to the task that it will not become a bureaucracy that imposes its will on the rest of the organisation. Instead of formal democracy the party leadership will have real contacts with the rank and file and this implies the implementation of accountability. The party membership must be active and be regularly involved in the party cells and factory groups. This activity will express the ability of the rank and file to be involved in the organisation of the party. The propaganda and agitation of the party must be orientated to the daily needs and interests of the workers: “It is only be means of such day to day grass roots work and by constant and full commitment to participation in all the struggles of the proletariat that the party can truly become a Communist Party.”(11) This comment reinforces the understanding that the party is an organisation that is responsive to the interests and aims of the workers. The conduct of the class struggle is connected to the profound interaction that occurs between party and class. Hence the very conception of leadership is not established by proclamation and is instead something that is learnt by the increasing ability of the party to provide leadership to the daily struggles of the workers: “Only by leading the working masses in the day to day struggle against the attacks of capitalism can the Communist Party become the vanguard of the working class, learning in practice how to lead the proletariat and prepare for the final overthrow of the bourgeoisie.”(12)

Consequently the conception of class struggle that is outlined is very principled in that it explicitly opposes the elitist view that the party should instruct the working class in how to act and advance the aim of revolution. Instead the party listens to the class and on this basis incorporates the aspirations of the working class into its conception of the strategy that is required in order to advance the aim of the overthrow of capitalism. Hence the question of leadership is based on the success of dialogue between party and class and the party cannot impose its imperatives onto the class. Instead the party should be seriously about what is of concern to the working class and so the party should not be indifferent to any demand generated by the working class despite its apparent limited character. Instead these demands should become part of the very struggle for socialism. The approach of the Communist party should also be part of the perspective defined by the united front. The Communist Party should appeal to the organisations of Social Democracy and the trade unions to become part of a united campaign to maintain the level of wages and to oppose the attacks of the employers. This process does not mean conciliation of Social Democracy but instead is about establishing its attitude to the offensive of the employers: “In order to expose the treachery of the workers’ leaders in this epoch of growing impoverishment and class conflict, the Communist Party has demanded that the other mass proletarian parties show where they stand. They must make it clear to the proletariat whether they are ready to join the Communist Party in the fight for a crust of bread and against the obviously deteriorating living conditions of the proletariat, and whether they are prepared to throw into the struggle those mighty organizations over which they say they have command.”(13)

The aim of the united front is primarily to establish a defensive struggle against the attacks of the employers. To this extent it is necessary to indicate that Social Democracy and the trade unions are often reluctant to take part in this struggle. However the practical aim is to create united forms of struggle that can cooperate around ‘a political programme of united action.’(14) This latter emphasis would seem to suggest that whilst it is important to indicate the opportunist limitations of Social Democracy and the trade union bureaucracy what is actually crucial is to create an effective mass movement of struggle that can oppose the actions of the employers. In this context if the trade union bureaucrats abandon the struggle their leadership role should be taken by principled militants including communists. The important role of the Communist party in these united struggles is vital if the result is to be success instead of defeat because of the betrayals of an inadequate leadership.

The discussion of the various levels of organisation of the party seems to be uncontroversial. No explicit mention is made of the possible role of factions but it is outlined that issues of a possible controversial nature should be fully discussed at all levels of the party. Furthermore the party made decide that individual party members may have the right to write in the party press about these controversial issues. However: “If the decision of the organization or leading Party body is in the view of certain other members incorrect, these comrades must not forget, when they speak or act in public, that to weaken or break the unity of the common front is the worst breach of discipline and the worst mistake that can be made in the revolutionary struggle.”(15) This formulation could be conceived as being a denial of the ability of the members to speak about disputed issues. This approach is regrettable but it has been the common practice of most organisations that have called themselves Marxist and Leninist. Hence these types of restrictive formulations are not sufficient in order to construct a theory that this organisational resolution is responsible for authoritarian party regimes. Instead the general character of this resolution concerns the importance of democratic dialogue between party and class and the necessity of active democracy in the relations between the party leadership and the rank and file. The resolution has also indicated the importance of the united front for the class struggle and suggested that controversial decisions should be decided by the whole of the membership. In other words despite the occasional justification of elitism and the implicit denial of the role of factions the resolution provides important guidelines for the role of the party in the class struggle and with regards to the principles of active democracy within the communist organisation. Consequently it would be unfair and dogmatic to consider this resolution as being a precedent for the bureaucratic degeneration of the Communist International and the individual party regimes.

Macnair utilises various quotations from Lukacs’s ‘History and Class Consciousness in order to indicate how they are influenced by the organisational resolutions of 1920 and 1921 and in this manner become the organisational and philosophical justification of the authoritarian regime of the SWP. However these quotes are arbitrary and surprisingly because Lukacs’s controversial conception of imputed consciousness is ignored. It is this approach which has become the basis of the various criticisms of the justification of elitism in his understanding of the relations between party and class. Meszaros explains this point in the following manner: “Thus in order to be able to bridge the gap between the ideal construct and the rather disconcerting real situation, Lukacs is led to an imperatival substitution – the party - as the actual embodiment and practical realization of the ‘proletarian ‘standpoint of totality’ and of the proletariat’s ‘conscious collective will’……For once the new idealization becomes the central point of reference, the reality of the class appears that much darker and the actual class consciousness that much more reified, while its counter-image, by the same token, all the brighter and practically…beyond reproach.”(16) In other words the importance of the party expressing the actual or principled consciousness of the working class implies that the class is unable to go beyond the empirical limitations established by the alienated condition of reification. Only the party can speak on behalf of the class in terms of its historic interests and the standpoint of totality. Is this view an accurate representation of the approach of Lukacs?

The actual formulation of imputed consciousness does not refer to the role of the party and instead is about the importance of the development of a consciousness that is superior to the limitations of empirical consciousness: “Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed ‘….. to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual – and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.”(17) The natural assumption would be that the party is the major transmitter of imputed consciousness, but the point that Lukacs is making is that only when the class is influenced and acts in accordance with imputed consciousness will it be possible for change to occur. Hence the party may be an important expression of imputed consciousness but it is the working class that is still the primary force that can transform this class consciousness into practice: “This means that it is able to act in such a way as to change reality; in the class consciousness of the proletariat theory and practice coincide and so it can consciously throw the weight of its actions onto the scales of history – and this is the deciding factor. When the vulgar Marxists destroy this unity they cut the nerve that binds proletarian theory to proletarian action.”(18) Consequently the principled role of the Marxist party is to utilise its understanding of imputed consciousness in order to encourage the mass action of the working class that will facilitate the prospect of change. The party uses its theoretical knowledge in order to promote the required level of theory within the working class that can bring about the development of revolutionary forms of practice. The fact that for a time the party has superior levels of knowledge and consciousness when compared to the class does not mean that the class is not the major factor in the process of revolutionary change. The relation of the party to the class is the interaction of theory and practice in order to enhance the understanding in the working class of why the overthrow of capitalism is a crucial task and objective. If the party remained a monopoly of theoretical knowledge the process of interaction of party and class would not occur and the prospect of principled practice is not realised. This conception was not understood by the Second International.

This understanding of imputed consciousness does not underestimate the problem of reification and alienated consciousness, or the tensions between immediate interests and long term objectives. But the view of Lukacs is that the very dynamics of the contradictions between the short-terms and long-term possibilities enable the possibility of class consciousness to be realised: “As we stressed in the motto to this essay the existence of this conflict enables us to perceive that class consciousness is identical with neither the psychological consciousness of individual members of the proletariat, nor with the (mass-psychological) consciousness of the proletariat as a whole,, but it is on the contrary, the sense become conscious, of the historical role of the class.”(19) The party may have an important role in generating this influence of principled class consciousness but what is also important is the problem of the contradiction between the limitations of the immediate situation and the possibilities of the long term. In this context the role of the party will be to enhance the sense of discontent with the immediate and therefore generation enthusiasm about the possibilities of the long term. This is not an accommodation of utopianism because the question of what could be is being connected to what is. Therefore whilst imputed consciousness could become the rationalisation of the hegemony of the party over the class it is also an explanation of how class consciousness develops. This means that apologetic reasoning is not being provided for party elitism and instead an understanding of the importance of the conscious transformation of society by the working class is justified.

It could be argued that the following type of formulation justifies an elitist conception of the relationship between party and class: “For the Communist Party shows itself to be superior to every other party organisation in two ways: firstly, for the first time in history the active and practical side of class consciousness directly influences the specific actions of every individual, and secondly, at the same time it consciously helps to determine the historical process.”(20) However despite the apparent one-sided understanding of the active relation of the party to what seems to be a passive class the actual ability of the party to influence the class can only occur if the imputed class consciousness becomes the active class consciousness of the majority of the working class. It is interesting that Lukacs only claims that the party ‘helps’ to ‘determine’ the historical process and therefore the party is not the most important aspect of change. Despite the apparent elitism of his standpoint, Lukacs is still suggesting that the major and most important agency of class consciousness is the working class via the influence of the Communist party. This is why he also argues that: “The criterion and guide to the correct relationship between class and the party can be found nowhere but in the class consciousness of the proletariat. On the one hand, the real, objective unity of class consciousness forms the basis of a dialectical alliance despite the organisational separation of class from the party. On the other hand, the prevailing disunity, the differing degrees of clarity and depth to be found in the consciousness of the different individuals, groups and strata of the proletariat make the organisational separation of the party from the class inevitable.”(21)

In other words the issue of the actual character of class consciousness is still defined by the role and importance of the working class despite the fact that its immediate expression is connected to the party. Hence the party is doing nothing more than articulating the class consciousness of the working class. In this sense the party is not defining the character of class consciousness as an external imposition in terms of the influence of the intellectuals and is instead overcoming the limitations of everyday consciousness in terms of the application of a principled conception. Hence the party is actually articulating what represents the principled features of the very class consciousness of the working class. In this approach the party is able to overcome the problem of sectional differentiation and the disunity that is expressed by the everyday consciousness and practice of the working class. Hence the party is able to project a principled conception of unity of the class which is based on an understanding of the most important features of the very class consciousness of the working class: “The struggle of the Communist Party is focused upon the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its organisational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle for its interests on its behalf and in its place……The fact that the organisation of the Communist Party becomes detached from the broad mass of the class is itself a function of the stratification of consciousness within the class, but at the same time the party exists in order to hasten the process by which these distinctions are smoothed out – at the highest level of consciousness obtainable.”(22) The point being made is that the separation of party and class is not generated by the desire for the party to define its relation to the class in terms of elitism. Instead it is the very unevenness of everyday class consciousness caused by stratification and sectional divisions that mean the party is able to articulate principled class consciousness on the basis of its conception of what represents unity. This means what is principled in relation to the advance of the class struggle and the relation of the immediate and long-term objectives of the working class. Consequently the role of the party is to discover what is meant by class consciousness rather than impose its own definition of this conception.

In relation to the question of organisation, Lukacs begins his analysis with recognition that the prospect of principled actions is connected to the character of organisation that promotes them. This acknowledgement is an attempt to justify Bolshevik organisation when contrasted to the role of the Second International, Menshevism, and the apparently spontaneous standpoint of Rosa Luxemburg. This approach seems to justify the rejection of individual freedom in the name of discipline and the solidarity of the organisation: “The conscious desire for the realm of freedom can only mean consciously taking the steps that will really lead to it……It implies the conscious subordination of the self to that collective will that is destined to bring real freedom into being and that today is earnestly taking the first arduous, uncertain and groping steps towards it. This conscious collective will is the Communist Party.”(23) Hence the ability to reconcile the role of the individual with the collective is expressed by the discipline of the party in relation to its organisational forms and daily practices. The participation of the party member in its activity enables that person to take part in the formation of its programme and policy. The duty of activity is connected to the rights of being part of the democratic processes of the party, and in this manner the freedom of the individual is realised in the new manner of being an important part of a common organisation: “A communist organisation, however, can only be created through struggle, it can only be realised if the justice and the necessity of this form of unity are accepted by every member as a result of his own experience.”(24) In other words unity cannot be imposed by rules and regulations that do not allow for the meaningful participation of the members within the organisation. Instead the sense of unity has to be created by the reconciliation of individual freedom with the organisational cohesion of the party.

This conception provides the justification of the perspective that the party should be based on the principle of participation. Thus it is not surprising that Lukacs comments: “Corresponding to this is the necessary appearance simultaneously of two complementary but equally false views of the course of history: the voluntaristic overestimation of the active importance of the individual (the leader) and the fatalistic underestimation of the importance of the class (the masses). The party is divided into an active and a passive group in which the latter is only occasionally brought into play and then only at the behest of the former. The ‘freedom’ possessed by the members of such parties is therefore nothing more than the freedom of more or less peripheral and never fully engaged observers to pass judgements on the fatalistically accepted course of events or the errors of individuals.”(25) We could argue that this type of comment actually represents critical assessment of the authoritarian and elitist character of organisations like the SWP. It could also be argued that the type of democratic party that is being upheld by Lukacs never existed and that instead the party dominated by the individual leader was more typical of the Comintern. However the party that he defined as the model type was one of active democracy and the participation of individuals in both the active and policy making. Thus: “Really active participation in every event, really practical involvement of all the members within an organisation can only be achieved by engaging the whole personality.”(26)

Therefore the approach of Lukacs is to indicate how the individual can be part of a collective and democratic organisation. He is arguing that the sense of the individual need not be submerged within the disciplined organisation and instead it is possible that the specific personalities of the members can flourish in terms of the interaction between participation and the role of rights and duties. It is also argued that the principled character of the organisation enables the party to establish relations with the rest of the working class. This also means that the party should develop theory that can facilitate action by the class: “We see here the importance of a correct theory for the organisation of the Communist Party. It must represent the highest objective possibility of proletarian action.”(27) Mike Macnair contends that the conception of theoretical agreement is a justification of intolerance, and so upholds the SWP type regime, but Lukacs actually relates the issue of theoretical development to the ability of the party to participate in the construction of theory as a democratic process in which the membership discuss the merits of theory in relation to the tasks of practice. It is the considerations of strategy that means the party has to be serious and participatory in relation to the question of developing a principled understanding of the relationship between theory and practice: “The pre-eminently practical nature of the Communist Party, the fact that it is a fighting party presupposes its possession of a correct theory, for otherwise the consequences of a false theory would soon destroy it. Moreover, it is a form or organisation that produces and reproduces correct theoretical insights by consciously ensuring that the organisation has built into it ways of adapting with increasing sensitivity to the effects of a theoretical posture. Thus the ability to act, the faculty of self-criticism, of self-correction and of theoretical development all co-exist in a state of constant interaction.”(28) For example the approach of the united front has been resisted within the Comintern because it does not seem to uphold a principled conception of the relationship between party and class. This apprehension indicates a mistrust of the difficulties involved in the development of class consciousness and the creation of the unity between party and class. The dogmatic aspect of this standpoint is that an assumption is being made that the united front is correct because it has been introduced by the leadership of the Comintern. However Lukacs also has an appreciation that the increasing complicated character of the tasks of the class struggle is the most important reason for the development of this tactic of the united front. The importance of practice has motivated this change of strategy from that of the offensive to recognition of the necessity of a more complex and defensive approach. Hence the relation of theory to practice has motivated democratic discussion within the Comintern about how to develop progress within the class struggle. The demands of theory have not led to an authoritarian regime, quite the opposite.

Lukacs also explains how the relation between tactics and organisation means that the party must be flexible and responsive to changing demands. This suggests that dogmatism that would justify either adventurism or accommodation to the reformist influences within the working class is an expression of the result of the rejection of the importance of theory. The point is that a one-sided and problematical relationship of party and class can be the result of the justification of a false strategy. This means that each phase of the class struggle suggests organisational transformation of the party and new forms of involvement of the party member in the carrying out of tasks: “Every hierarchy (and while the struggle is raging it is inevitable that there should be a hierarchy), must be based on the suitability of certain talents for the objective requirements of the particular phase of the struggle. If the revolution leaves a particular phase behind, it would not be possible to adapt oneself to the exigencies of the new situation merely by changing one’s tactics, or even by changing the form of the organisation…….What is needed in addition is a reshuffle in the party hierarchy: the selection of personnel must be exactly suited to the new phase of the struggle.”(29)

Thus far from theory justifying the formation of a bureaucratic party regime instead the demands of theoretical and organisational flexibility because of the changing character of the class struggle and the importance of new tactics might also require changes in the party leadership. This process can only be completed if the party is democratic and amenable to the prospect of the creation of new leaders who will be more suited to the new tasks demanded by the changing situation of the class struggle. Lukacs considers that there are two types of party organisation. Firstly, the elite party in which the role of the leadership is isolated from the rank and file, and so the relations are based on apathy and unthinking trust in the leadership. The role of criticism will be limited to the party congress. (The SWP could be defined as this type of organisation) Secondly, the party is based on active participation of the rank and file and principled accountability of the leadership. The leadership has to convince the members of the validity of their actions and the leaders do not automatically represent the members because of the functioning of principled democracy based on the role of the collective will and solidarity.(30) He concludes: “The party as a whole transcends the reified divisions according to nation, profession, etc, and according to modes of life (economics and politics) by virtue of its action. For this is orientated towards revolutionary unity and collaboration and aims to establish the true unity of the proletarian class. And what it does as a whole it performs likewise for its individual members. Its closely knit organisation with its resulting iron discipline and its demand for total commitment tears away the reified veils that cloud the consciousness of the individual in capitalist society.”(31)

Hence support for iron discipline is based on the importance of extensive participation by the rank and file in the organisation and policy making of the party. The party leadership has no right to demand unthinking obedience from the rank and file and instead the issue of support for the leadership depends on the extent of its ability to develop a theoretical understanding of the situation that is able to explain the latest phase of the class struggle. It is perfectly permissible for the rank and file to demand a new leadership if it considers that the existing leadership is not equal to the tasks and objectives generated by a new period in the class struggle. This view implies a close accountability of the leadership to the rank and file and it implies a level of participatory democracy that is not present within many Marxist organisations, never mind the SWP. The views of Lukacs appear to be in the spirit of the organisational resolution of 1921 which is also democratic, and aware of the obligations of the members in order to ensure that the organisation is accountable. It is true that this democratic conception of the party remained essentially formal because of the process of the bureaucratic degeneration of the Comintern but it would be dogmatic to consider that this degeneration was because of an emphasis on the importance of theory or the wording of the two organisational resolutions. Indeed it can be argued that the emphasis on theory in order to promote revolutionary practice actually enhanced the prospect of the development of democratic organisation. Consequently, the view of Mike Macnair that Lukacs supported activism is a caricature that is opposed by his commitment to a conception of the party that is based on active democracy and the important role of the rank and file in policy making. Hence if we can agree that Alex Callinicos utilises Lukacs in order to justify the party regime of the SWP it is necessary to consider this view as being calculating and with little relationship to the actual position of Lukacs.

It is also necessary to emphasise that Macnair’s view that Lukacs is either providing an ultra-left rationalisation of the 1921 March offensive or bureaucratic support of the 1920 and 1921 organisational resolutions is wrong. Lukacs is quite prepared to argue that the German Communist Party was not equal to the tasks posed by the Kapp putsch, and the mass struggles of the working class in the 1918-20 period, and to also argue against the adventurism at the time of the March offensive. Hence it is not surprising that he supported the united front turn of 1921 and it could be argued that his book is generally supportive of the first three congresses of the Comintern. In addition he provides the most democratic interpretation possible of the model of party organisation. Hence his position is actually superior to the organisational resolutions of the Comintern. If anything there is a contradiction between his standpoint and the rigid 21 conditions for membership of the Comintern. Consequently to suggest that Lukacs is the philosophical voice of the modern SWP is a caricature of his views.

Furthermore it is an over-simplification to suggest that the philosophical standpoint of Callinicos is defined by the views of Lukacs. Callinicos has often modified his philosophical views over the last 30 years and he has not sought to support his perspectives in terms of the standpoint of any individual philosopher. In one of his early works: ‘Marxism and Philosophy’ he was actually critical of Lukacs for accommodating to a Hegelian philosophy of history concerning his conception of historical materialism: “Here the idealist implications of the concept of an identical subject-object are most clearly exposed. Social relations are reduced to forms of consciousness, while ideological struggle is given primacy in the overthrow of capitalism. We are not far here from the Young Hegelians.”(32) Hence Callinicos can only consider ‘History and Class Consciousness’ as a partial expression of Marxism and Leninism. In contrast, Callinicos is more sympathetic to realism for providing an approach that is compatible with the views of Marx and historical materialism.(33)

In a later work, Callinicos becomes more sympathetic to Lukacs’s History and Class Consciousness: “History and Class Consciousness is a philosophical tour de force. It provides a theoretical rationale for an activist, non-determinist Marxism based on a careful and innovative reading of German idealist philosophy, the classical Marxist tradition and the sociology of Weber and Simmel. Most (though not all) later Marxist theorists have been heavily in its debt.”(34) However, Callinicos still has serious criticisms of the Hegelian approach of Lukacs such as the understanding of history being defined by the role of a subject. He is also reticent to support the concept of imputed consciousness, but he denies that Lukacs provides justification for a Stalinist type of conception of the party. Hence it can be argued that Callinicos would consider that Lukacs would have a role within Marxism in order to facilitate the opposition to the determinist Marxism of Kautsky and Plekhanov, but the crucial point is that Callinicos major concern is about trying to develop an explanatory conception of historical materialism that is able to comprehend the relationship between structure and agency. In this context he is prepared to discuss many individuals and their contribution to Marxism.(35) Hence it is not surprising that Callinicos is still prepared to be very critical about important aspects of the work of Lukacs. For example, he conceives imputed class consciousness as being wrong: “Treating class consciousness as something which can be imputed to agents simply by virtue of their objective relationship to the means of production massively underestimates the difficulties involved in subordinate classes actually becoming collectivities.”(36)

With this serious criticism of Lukacs it is not surprising that Callinicos does not rely on his approach for understanding the development of class consciousness. Instead he relies on Hal Draper textual interpretation of the work of Marx in order to establish that it is the process of class struggle that creates the possibility for the emergence of a type of consciousness that would challenge the domination of capital: “Marx distinguished himself by his insistence that trade union struggle was indispensable as a means of transforming the working class into a political force with the capacity to overturn capital and build communism.”(37) The question of how this situation of conflict and struggle is understood by Marxism is considered to be possible without profound philosophical interpretation and is instead interpreted by the role of historical materialism. This establishes the relationship between the structural context and the dynamism of agency that enables strategies of change to be articulated: “Classical Marxism is the theoretically clarified experience of the international working class movement. What allows it to play this role is the fact that it is more than a phenomenology of the class struggle, that it is historical materialism, an empirical theory which roots the mechanisms of social change in the structural properties of successive modes of production. Without this structural dimension Marxism would lack the means to identify both the possibilities and limits of change in particular circumstances, the powers which individual and collective actors can invoke.”(38)

In other words the issue of what is Classical Marxism is very general. It can apply to the traditional creators of Marxism such as the founders and the theoreticians of the Second International. It can also apply to Bolshevism, the Communist International and the Left Opposition movement. But it can also include anyone that is able to make a contribution to the issue of the relationship between structure and agency when studying the prospects of change. In this context it would be contradictory for Callinicos to claim that we can reduce the analytical complexity of historical materialism to the justification of one philosophical trend. Hence it is not surprising that his philosophical standpoint is based on the approach of realism combined with the more empiricist approach of Lakatos.(39) One of his more recent comments implies that he has become sympathetic to Roy Bhaskar’s conception of realism: “The concept of causality appropriate to historical inquiry is notoriously controversial. I ignore the issue here, but for what it’s worth, Roy Bhaskar what seems to me the best available account of causal explanations of the social world.”(38) This very careful endorsement of the standpoint of one individual philosopher would seem to vindicate the view that Callinicos’s approach is not suitable for endorsement of the views of one theorist as being infallible and the criteria for the defence of the theory and practice of the SWP. Consequently the utilisation of Lukacs in order to defend the party regime of the SWP does not imply that Lukacs has become the philosopher of the SWP. Indeed this interpretation would contradict Callinicos’s recognition that many individual have contributed to the development of Marxist theory and practice. Therefore the recent utilisation of Lukacs in order to justify the organisation of the SWP is an empirical expediency that has little relation to Callinicos’s often critical views of Lukacs and which also contradicts his understanding of the diverse and complex development of Marxist theory and historical materialism.

The contemporary SWP is an organisation that has many acute contradictions. One of the most important is that it is led by an intellectual who is prepared to discuss Marxism in an open and flexible manner and yet he is a person who is prepared to tolerate a corrupt and rigid party regime. Callinicos has not been able to overcome the authoritarianism of the Cliff regime and instead he is apparently prepared to accept behaviour that is not compatible with communist norms of behaviour. Only in his intellectual work does Callinicos act in a principled manner and produces work that makes an important contribution to Marxist theory. Thus his balanced and thoughtful views about Lukacs in intellectual terms become reduced to crude justifications of the party regime. Mike Macnair would be better served to address the content of Callinicos’s intellectual work and ignore the theoretical significance of his role as party dictator. We can also suggest that understanding Lukacs cannot be reduced to the views of Callinicos’s work for the SWP and instead he deserves more thoughtful consideration. Mike Macnair utilises the crisis of the SWP in order to reject the role of philosophy. We would suggest that the continuation of philosophy, including Marxist philosophy, will supersede the historical limitations of the party regime of the SWP. True humility would imply that we can learn more from Lukacs than we should reject.

FOOTNOTES

(1)Mike Macnair: The Philosophy Trap, in Weekly Worker Number 987, November 21 2013 p6-7

(2)Comintern (Zinoviev) The Role of the Party in the Proletarian Revolution, In: “Theses, Resolutions and Manifestoes of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, Ink Links, London, 1980 p68-75

(3)ibid p68

(4)ibid p69-70

(5)ibid p72

(6)ibid p73

(7)ibid: Leon Trotsky: Manifesto of the Second World Congress p168

(8)ibid: Leon Trotsky: Theses of the Third World Congress on the International Situation and the Tasks of the Cominternp202

(9)ibid: Theses on the Organizational Structure of the Communist Parties, the Methods and Contents of their Work, p234-235

(10ibid p235

(11)ibid p241

(12)ibid p242

(13)ibid p248

(14)ibid p249

(15)ibid p257

(16)Istvan Meszaros: Beyond Capital, Merlin, London 1995 p326

(17)Georg Lukacs History and Class Consciousness, Merlin, London, 1971 p51

(18)ibid p69

(19)ibid p73

(20)ibid p318

(21)ibid p322

(22)ibid p326

(23)ibid, p315

(24)ibid p317

(25)ibid p318-319

(26)ibid p319

(27)ibid p327

(28)ibid p327

(29)ibid p336

(30)ibid p336-337

(31)ibid p339

(32)Alex Callinicos: Marxism and Philosophy, Oxford University Press, 1983 p78

(33)ibid p114-116

(34)Alex Callinicos: Social Theory, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1999 p208

(35)Alex Callinicos: Making History, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1987

(36)ibid p138

(37)ibid p187

(38ibid p227

(39)Callinicos: Marxism and Philosophy op cit p114-126

(40)Alex Callinicos: Theories and Narratives, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1995 p233